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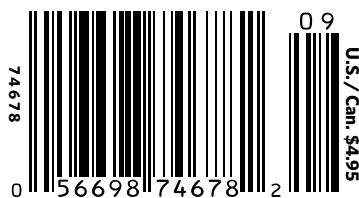


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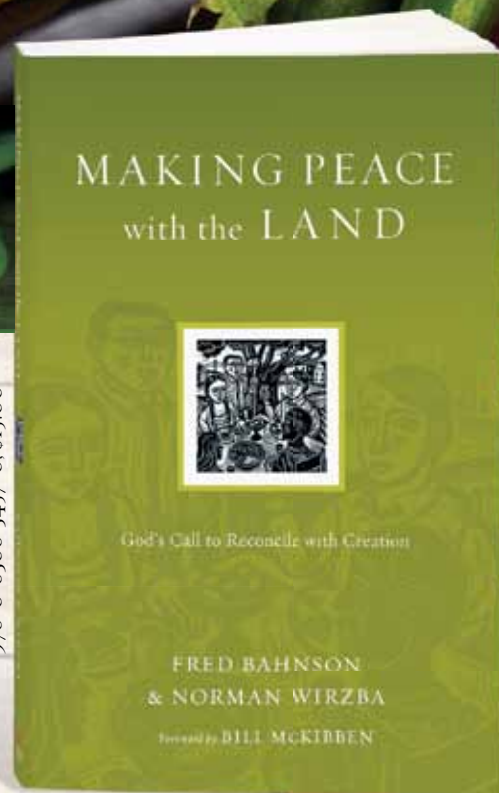
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HOW TO MAKE schools work for all children is a hot topic these days—and a vital one for people of faith called to love our neighbors. While the vast majority of private schools are faith-affiliated, nearly 90 percent of U.S. children attend public schools. Their quality is key to the common good. In this month's issue, experts offer their views on how to fix a situation where, as Expectations Project founder Nicole Baker Fulgham writes, "50 percent of [U.S.] kids growing up in poverty drop out of high school." Fulgham focuses on learning from the most successful schools and teachers, while encouraging schools, teachers, and parents to work together.

Meanwhile Jan Resseger, of the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ, warns against a "lifeboat" mentality that rewards a few schools, without investing in all to enable the basics—reasonable class size, pre-kindergarten classes, teacher mentoring. Education reform, she notes, can't work if



class analysis is ignored: "Wealthy places put vast amounts of money in schools and poorer places can't, and our states aren't equalizing it." Faith for Change founder Romal Tune offers some practical examples of how faith-based groups can offer

material support to their community's schools, as well as advocacy for them.

This fall marks not only the start of the school year, but also the 50th anniversary of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the classic book that launched the modern environmental movement and led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Today, as humanity's actions pose the massive global threat of climate change, it's more important than ever to learn and teach about environmental truths.

One key climate-related vocabulary term comes in this month's Commentary section: Evangelical environmental scientist Cal DeWitt points out that it's far more accurate to call oil, gas, and coal "fossil carbons," rather than "fossil fuels." This recognizes their millennia-long role in creation's system of sequestering carbon—a system that is reversed whenever we set part of it on fire inside our cars and power plants. In this case of learn or burn, the planet is at stake. ■

Letters

MUJERISTA LEGACY

I really appreciated your article about Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "The Mother of Mujerista Theology" (by Rose Marie Berger, July 2012). I had the privilege of taking a summer course with her at the Hispanic Summer Program. Coming from a Latino macho culture, where most of ministry is in the hands of males while the majority of churches are composed of women, it was refreshing to hear her voice claiming women's equality in ministry, not only at the parish level but also in academia and church leadership. Her voice will be greatly missed, but her pioneering work in *mujerista* theology will continue through the voices of the generations of women scholars through the U.S.

Ricardo Moreno
Pasadena, California

HATE EXPOSED

Westboro Baptist Church's absurd notions of humanity are readily evident, in both word and picture, in Joanie Eppinga's interview of researcher Rebecca Barrett-Fox ("The Face of Hate," June 2012). If "God Hates America," as is pictured in the Westboro sign on the cover of the issue, then does this mean that

"Ada María Isasi-Díaz's voice claiming women's equality in academia and church leadership will be greatly missed."

God loves Poland or Lithuania instead? Does God's allegiance change daily, favoring America on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and then a different country on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays?

Barrett-Fox tries to put a human face on a group of hatemongers. It is easy to see why no members of Westboro were interviewed for the piece. Their hatred for humanity can only breed more hatred, and it must be wondered whether anything good could arise from such an ideology.

Although it may rankle many, the Topeka church does enjoy the same freedom of speech as the rest of the masses in America. However, now that they have expressed themselves (although many would say that they exposed themselves), it is time to focus upon issues that really matter in this country: an end to hunger, a reduction in poverty, and building a sustainable infrastructure that

values the human being, ensuring opportunities for all in a truly egalitarian fashion.

Robert P. Russo
Perrysburg, Ohio

DEADLY 'DEFENSE'

Regarding Jim Rice's column "Fairness for Whom?" (June 2012): One of Martin Luther King Jr.'s prophecies fits the effects of today's right-wing political agenda with uncanny accuracy: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Larry Boudreau
San Antonio, Texas

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A NEW EVANGELICAL MANIFESTO



A KINGDOM VISION FOR THE COMMON GOOD — DAVID P. GUSHEE, EDITOR

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BY JIM WALLIS

How to Change Politics



THIS SUMMER, in a historic development, nearly 150 evangelical leaders signed an “Evangelical Statement of Principles for Immigration Reform.” Signers came from across the spectrum of evangelicalism, from leading Latino evangelical organizations to pastors Max Lucado, Bill Hybels, Joel Hunter, and Jim Daly, president of Focus on the Family.

No, that isn’t a typo. Sojourners stood side by side with Focus on the Family to draw attention to the plight of millions who have been caught up in a broken system. It was exciting to see a unity across the traditional political spectrum that rarely happens in Washington.

Make no mistake: There are still big gaps in theology and poli-

tics across the country change. Things change when people’s understandings change, when families rethink their values, when congregations examine their faith, when communities get mobilized, and when nations are moved by moral imperatives. Things change when people believe that more than politics is at stake, that human lives, human dignity, and even faith are at stake. And when moral values change, culture changes—and then change comes to Washington.

The Bible says that immigrants fall into the category of “the stranger,” and Jesus says how we treat them is how we treat him. Many of them are our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. We have come to know them and to love them; we’ve come to see how their families are being torn apart, and their lives are in danger. And we believe that breaks the heart of God and calls us to action.

Together, we will tell our political representatives that it is time to shed their partisan behavior and implement a moral and biblical imperative. We believe Washington will change and enact comprehensive immigration reform because the people of God have come together to begin that change in our lives and our churches.

The same day the evangelical statement was released, a delegation of evangelical leaders had a long meeting at the White House, followed the next day by meetings with Republican and Democratic members of Congress. Our message to both was the same: It’s time to rise above our partisan political deadlock and do the right thing.

On Friday of that week, we got a call from the White House, telling us that the president had decided to make a major announcement. He announced a new policy of “prosecutorial discretion” for nearly 1 million undocumented young people. It provided immunity from deportation

for those who were brought to the U.S. before they turned 16 and are younger than 30, have been here for at least five years, have no criminal history, and graduated from a U.S. high school, earned a GED, or served in the military.

The announcement was good news for young people who have a dream of staying in the country where they have lived most of their lives. Instead of being placed in the deportation pipeline, they can receive work permits enabling them to contribute to the nation and help build America’s future. It was an important step, but only a beginning toward true comprehensive immigration reform.

Two days later, on Sunday, there was great joy in churches across the country, with many celebrations of Christians, both Latino and Anglo—often together—singing, dancing, and praising God. It was also Father’s Day, and many immigrant fathers felt for the first time in their lives the relief of not having their children living in the shadows of fear. And from almost a million young immigrants in the United States, there were many grateful tears.

Both political sides and the media said that the statement by such a unified and influential group of evangelical Christian leaders made an enormous difference and created the space and support for political leaders to do the right thing. The week had opened the door for a new bipartisan hope for immigration reform. But it was a bipartisan result that neither side in politics had been willing or able to accomplish. It took moral pressure from outside the political system to get the system to slowly begin to work. And that is often the way that politics changes—especially on the big things.

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners.

No, that isn't a typo: Sojourners stood side by side with Focus on the Family.

tics among those in the group. But rather than politics, we focused on the things we agreed were fundamental moral issues and biblical imperatives. Instead of ideology, we came together because of morality and common sense.

Big things don’t change in Washington first; they change in the nation’s capital last. You’d think that with all the lobbyists on K Street and the billions of dollars being spent, Washington must be the country’s most important place. But this is the place where things don’t change, where politics maintains the status quo and the special interests maintain their own interests. Both Republicans and Democrats are more concerned with their political bases and getting re-elected than with the people and families whose lives are being crushed.

Things change when hearts and

Charlie Nebergall/AP



Rolling Wonder • Simone Campbell, a member of the Sisters of Social Service Catholic religious order, addresses a crowd in Ames, Iowa, in June, as part of a “Nuns on the Bus” tour. Five sisters affiliated with NETWORK, a Catholic social justice lobby, led a nine-state tour to draw attention to the draconian federal budget proposed by Rep. Paul Ryan (also a Catholic), which would cut food stamps, Medicaid, and other services to the poorest Americans.

By Eric DeBode

Ending the Death Penalty

A California measure would fight crime—and deficits—by repealing capital punishment.

IN NOVEMBER, Californians will vote on a ballot initiative that would end the death penalty in the state: the Safety, Accountability, and Full Enforcement Act of 2012, known as the SAFE California Act. The backdrop of this vote is California’s deep economic crisis and the economic savings to be gained from ending capital punishment. But when the debate is largely concerned that the cost of killing criminals is just too high, where does faith come into the conversation?

If the measure passes, all 725 death penalty sentences in California will be converted to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. The supporters of the initiative have one main mantra: “California can’t afford the death penalty!” This initiative delivers on savings—around \$1 billion in the first five years, say supporters—due to halting the death penalty’s expensive legal processes and increased

costs for death row detention.

The initiative also redirects some of those funds, \$30 million per year for three years, to counties across the state to help investigate unsolved cases of rape and murder. In 60 percent of rapes and 36 percent of murders in California, no one is even charged with the crime, let alone convicted.

People of faith have one more reason to oppose the death penalty.

Death row prisoners are generally not allowed to work; once their sentences are changed under this initiative, they will be required to work inside the prison and to pay into California’s victim compensation fund.

People of faith usually argue to end the death penalty on gospel and ethical grounds,

citing the command “thou shalt not kill,” the call to forgive, and the call to love our enemies. However, the most compelling variable at play in this historical moment is California’s budget crisis—in this case, as always, the budget is a moral document. Where we spend our money as a society discloses our true values and priorities: It shows

whether we believe in the God of life or the power of death.

The SAFE California Act has an impressive and diverse list of supporters, including the former warden of San Quentin, Jeanne Woodford, who oversaw four executions; Don Heller and Ron Briggs, who helped write and pass California’s death penalty

Our Mission

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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law in 1978; several victims' rights groups; and a former California attorney general. Other endorsers include judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and several leadership bodies of civic and religious organizations.

Like many of you, I have done my research. I've learned that the death penalty is applied overwhelmingly to poor people, mostly to people of color, especially those who kill white people; that it does not deliver a reduction in crime; that it is outrageously expensive without delivering any substantive healing for victims; and that it is inequitably pursued (for example, in California it is applied more in some counties than in others). It is costly revenge, indeed.

So the question now turns on how to best deal with this mess we have made. The

budget crisis brings a laser focus to this question. Those who support alternatives to the death penalty are seizing the moment.

It is smart to stop funding a massive capital punishment system that doesn't do what it purports; smart to have prisoners work and pay into a victim compensation fund; smart to redirect funds toward solving violent crimes, which would enhance public safety; smart to save around \$1 billion in the first five years alone. People of faith—in California, and in other states that may be inspired to follow the lead of the SAFE California Act—can add “smart” to the reasons to oppose the death penalty. ■

Eric DeBode is a member of the Kelly Avenue Catholic Worker in Half Moon Bay, Calif. For more, visit safecalifornia.org.

By Cynthia Johnson-Oliver

A Healthy Step in the Right Direction

Faith groups celebrate the Supreme Court's health-care decision—and then get back to work.

ON A WINDY morning this March, as the Supreme Court began hearing oral arguments about the health-care reform law, the Affordable Care Act (ACA), hundreds of people of faith gathered in front of the court building. As part of a public witness, they prayed and carried signs that proclaimed “People of Faith for Health Care.” Participants came from various faith traditions and denominations, many of which also signed an amicus brief in support of the ACA's expansion of Medicaid to cover more low-income adults. The event was organized by two interfaith coalitions, Faithful Reform in Health Care and the Washington Interreligious Staff Community (WISC) Health Care Working Group.

The groups involved were motivated not by political beliefs but by a moral imperative, shared across faith traditions, to build a just society that cares for the poor, the sick, the widow, the orphan, and “the least of these.”

Those who gathered believe that their prayers on behalf of the uninsured were heard when, almost three months later to the day, the Supreme Court upheld the ACA. Chief Justice John Roberts' vote with the more liberal justices led to the unlikely

majority that provided a major step forward in the century-long struggle for health-care justice in the U.S.

Numerous faith groups praised the decision. Faithful Reform in Health Care and the WISC Health Care Working Group issued a joint statement, signed by 53 national, state, and local faith organizations, saying that “people of faith have worked both individually and collectively to move our nation toward a more inclusive and just system of health care,” one “that offers health, wholeness, and human dignity for all” and is “affordable, accessible, and accountable.” They added, “We applaud the U.S. Supreme Court justices for upholding the law.”

The General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church said that it “celebrates today's Supreme Court decision” because the denomination's “historic position that health care is a basic human right is informed by our biblical and theological witness. Everyone should have health care.” The ACA, the board said, is “a huge step in the right direction.”

The Catholic social justice lobby NETWORK announced it was “extremely pleased” with the decision: “This health-care

From the Archives

Fall 1971

Dear Jesus ...

APPARENTLY you have never really understood the white man's religion. If you had, you would not have begun your public ministry by calling for repentance. I mean, repentance is radical change, a recognition of guilt, a reversal of its past, an about-face. You can't expect that from people.

You must have read the multitude of studies that show beyond a shadow of a doubt that no means of communication can do more than make very slight changes. But you talk about "rebirth." What nonsense! ... You ought to focus on smaller changes that might reasonably be expected. But no. You make outrageous demands that force people to conclude that you are irresponsible. ...

Honestly Jesus, you are so confused I hardly know what more to say. All this talk about love in a world that only understands power. And surely it is a mistake to insist that you came "not to bring peace, but a sword." At a time like this, people need to be reconciled to each other, and you can't do that by insisting on righteousness. Personally, I am left absolutely speechless when I hear you tell responsible citizens to sell what they have. Don't you realize how this strikes at the very heart of our economy?

So I just don't know what to say. But I do know this. If you continue following your present pattern, the same thing will happen to you as happened to John the Baptist and most of the prophets in the Old Testament. ■

John F. Alexander was editor of The Other Side when this article appeared.



reform law is a positive response to the undeniable moral imperative that health-care access is a human right. Upholding it means that the U.S. continues to be a land where citizens are entitled to the most basic health care."

While praising the decision, faith groups also recognized the need for continued advocacy for the law to be fully implemented. Faithful Reform in Health Care and the WISC Health Care Working Group called on Congress to refrain from further attempts to derail the legislation. They also affirmed the role of faith groups in ongoing efforts to educate the public about health-care reform: "We are eager ... to inform our faith communities about the benefits of the Affordable Care Act, and to get uninsured persons connected to the health care they need."

By Calvin B. DeWitt

The Deadly Misnomer of 'Fossil Fuels'

Just because you can set something on fire doesn't mean you should.

COAL, NATURAL gas, petroleum. Thoughtlessly we call these substances "fuels"—fuels to burn for creating pleasant climates inside homes and offices; fuels to power appliances and engines. For years, like nearly everyone, I never thought beyond our mere use of these things. I neglected to consider their role in the Earth's wider economy.

This all changed when my family moved to a Wisconsin peatland in 1972. Since then, conducting research there with my graduate students has produced four decades of discovery.

For thousands of years, wetland plants and algae in a bay of glacial Lake Waubesa took carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. They transformed it by photosynthesis into the carbon structure of life, eventually adding their remains, page upon page, to the accumulating peat. Eventually, this peat filled the bay for an area more than a mile long, reaching a depth of 95 feet at the present lake edge. When first I walked here, I saw the vibrant surface of plants and wetland

Thus, the Supreme Court decision moves the country one step closer to health-care justice—but more steps are still needed. Many faith groups still hear the prophet Jeremiah crying out, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" Full implementation of the ACA, and more, is needed to move the U.S. closer to the ideal of health care as a basic human right for all—and to the day when our prayers will have truly been answered. ■

Cynthia Johnson-Oliver (@CJohnsonOliver) is a national organizer for health-care advocacy for the General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church.



English farmers loading a peat cart, circa 1905.

Alexander Eric Hasse

creatures; now, in my mind's eye, I also see the deep-layered remains of creatures below.

Also standing and walking here (much more gracefully than I) are sandhill cranes. These stately creatures, as conservationist Aldo Leopold observed, "stand, as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history." Elsewhere, the sodden pages of peat deposits have been cut over the ages to be dried for fuel. The early Romans saw this practiced by conquered peoples of northern and western Europe. Peat was also used as fuel in Ireland, Scotland, and northern Europe after forests were cleared for agriculture. And peat is the precursor of coal, transforming under geologic pressure into brown coal, bitumen,

bituminous coal, and anthracite.

These plant remains are part of the great system whereby carbon is removed from the atmosphere, helping to maintain a habitable Earth. This carbon-sequestering process incorporates not only peat and coal but also natural gas and petroleum—all of them products of life whose carbon all came, directly or up through the food chain, from photosynthesis.

Carbon sequestration is not a human invention, nor is it recent. Instead, it is part of a dynamic equilibrium that maintains the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere in ways that sustain the Earth as a habitable abode. Currently, we are mistaking Earth's great carbon sequestration system for fuel, and burning its contents on

**Our folly is burning up
the substance of the very
system that is vital to
sustain life on Earth.**

an enormous scale. Our folly is burning up the substance of the very system that is vital to sustain life on Earth.

The lessons of the great carbon-bearing volumes of Earth must be read, understood, and applied—promptly and sincerely. Neglect and denial of these volumes and their meaning must not be tolerated any longer. It is vitally, urgently necessary to place the human economy within the operations of the biospheric economy—including Earth's carbon economy.

A first step toward our needed response is to replace the term “fossil fuel” with “fossil carbon.” This recognizes that carbon is much more than fuel: It's the backbone of all life, a major atmospheric regulator of Earth's climate, and a moderator of the acidity of the world's oceans. Burning Earth's great system of carbon sequestration is disastrous for the biospheric economy—and therefore for our own. ■

Calvin B. DeWitt is a professor emeritus of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the president of the Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists.

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Gathering Around the Peace Table

SEVEN AMERICAN women sat at a long rectangular table with 10 pastors from rural communities in Eastern Congo to learn about the pastors' work of healing and reconciliation. A brilliant World Relief translator moved seamlessly from Swahili to French to English as we jotted notes.

"When Marcel from World Relief first gathered local pastors together, we were suffering," one pastor said. "But he reminded us that, even in circumstances like these, the church has a crucial role to play. All the victims in our communities are people given to us to care for."

Local church pastors in the North Kivu region of Congo face personally all the sufferings common to members of their communities: murder of family members by armed

Sometimes the most needy are church members; sometimes they aren't. It doesn't matter.

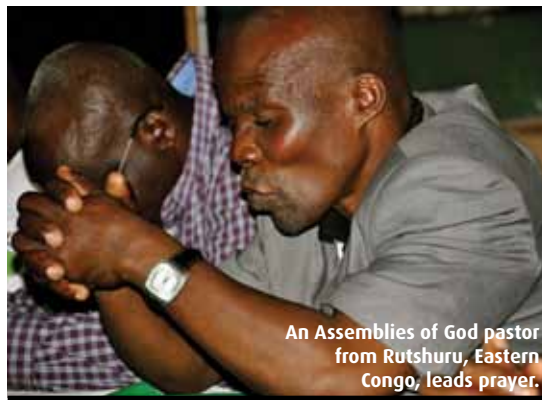
In June 2012, I took my second trip to Eastern Congo. I had met many of the pastors on my first trip to Congo in 2009 and was

amazed by the progress they had made in just three years.

On this trip, our team of seven spent a day listening to 11 women courageously share their stories of rape and other violence by rebels and "bandits"—and the care they received from lay counselors provided by the church committees. In some cases, women had found their way to the counselors bleeding and naked, having lost everything, including their families. The women said, "The counselors literally gave us back our lives."

Equally impressive were the village peace committees—men and women from every denomination and tribe in the region, appointed by their churches to resolve disputes and facilitate reconciliation in their communities. We spent an entire day seated in a concrete church building listening to 20 stories of reconciliation: Broken marriages. Conflicts between parents and children. Disputes over land. Paternal neglect. Violation of widows' rights. It was like sitting in a passage of the Bible: "A certain widow had two sons ..." Except the story unfolded in 2012 in Rutshuru, Congo, and the agents of reconciliation—who had the wisdom of Solomon—were the humble leaders seated before us.

In each case, disputing parties had tried other



Christine Anderson

An Assemblies of God pastor from Rutshuru, Eastern Congo, leads prayer.

options—which basically meant paying bribes to local police and judges, trying to get someone to take up their cause. But bribes and justice seldom kiss. Finally, they would hear about the peace committees, who take no bribes, earn no salaries, and seek only the benefit of those involved in the conflict. The favored technique of reconciliation is to initiate ongoing conversations with the disputing parties—separately at first—and slowly allow possible solutions to emerge from the shared ideas. These solutions always involve compromise and must be accepted by each party rather than imposed upon them.

Several days after I returned from Congo, a *New York Times* columnist suggested that the largely ineffective U.N. peacekeeping mission in the Congo "should refocus its efforts on supporting grassroots projects directed at resolving local conflicts ..."

I wonder if that writer knew he was describing the local churches of Eastern Congo. ■

Lynne Hybels, co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois, is author of *Nice Girls Don't Change the World*. To learn more about the churches of Eastern Congo, read Lynne's *Congo Journal* at lynnehybels.com.



"We've been caught up in conflict and violence for so long." —Congolese pastor

militias; rape of mothers, wives, and daughters as a weapon of war; displacement from their homes because of local conflict; an economy based on subsistence farming destroyed when crops are burned or uprooted by marauding rebels.

But their personal suffering doesn't invalidate their biblical call to "care for the least of these." Marcel, formerly a local Congolese pastor, works with World Relief Congo to serve local pastors by providing training in leadership, community transformation, trauma healing, and conflict resolution.

The pastors' first challenge was to create committees representing every denomination and tribe in the region. The committees meet monthly to determine who in the community is most in need—a family with nothing to eat, a widow without shelter, a victim of sexual assault who needs hospital care.

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The Vocation of Presence

A FEW YEARS back, *Sojourners* editor-in-chief Jim Wallis and I did a talk together at Northwestern University. After the event, the line to see Jim was dozens of people long. They wanted him to sign their books, to offer encouragement on their new social justice projects, to meet their kids, to give pastoral advice on a problem

part of this work.”

I just hit the 10-year mark of running Interfaith Youth Core, and the 15-year point of my first involvement with interfaith work. I haven’t logged as many miles or given as many speeches as Jim, but my schedule tends in a similar direction. The image of him talking to all those young people after that event at Northwestern sticks in my mind every time I board an early flight or prepare for a day of workshops followed by a late-night keynote.

I want to think of my work in interfaith leadership as a vocation and a craft. Searching for the right stories to help people see faith as a bridge rather than a barrier; telling those stories in a way that inspires people; listening with compassion and care as people share their faith journeys; helping faculty members teach classes that introduce people to the theory and practice of interfaith relations; nurturing young people in their own interfaith leadership; helping college administrators shape campus ecologies that advance interfaith cooperation; showing people how to gently shift conversations away from divisive areas and toward shared values—this is the vocation and craft of interfaith leadership.

It requires great love and care, the same kind of attention that a master musician or a master carver or a great preacher pays to her work. Sometimes I fly through my schedule so fast that I zoom past the craft. That’s not interfaith leadership—that’s just going through the motions. I know it, and I know my audience senses it too. It leaves everyone empty.

There is a story about St. Francis of Assisi tending his garden. A man passes by, regards St. Francis for a moment, and decides to try to stump him. “What if I were to tell you that the world is going to end tonight; what would you do?” he asks.

St. Francis looks up and smiles and says, “I would continue to tend my garden.”

May we all have work that absorbs us, that we feel is the most important thing we can be offering the world. And may we give it the love and care it deserves. ■



Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes about social justice from his perspective as a Muslim American. His latest book is *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*.

Sometimes I fly through my schedule so fast that I zoom past the craft.

they were having. Jim talked to each and every one of them, some for several minutes. It delayed our dinner by at least an hour.

As we were finally sitting down in the restaurant and tucking in to our salads, I asked Jim why he stayed for so long. Why not do what so many other public figures do—leave right after your part of the show is over?

“I am a preacher and a pastor,” he answered. “An important part of my vocation is spending loving time with individuals. The period right after a public talk is an excellent opportunity to do that.”

“Plus,” he added, with a twinkle in his eye, “listening to other people’s stories may be the best

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A FAITHFUL RESPONSE TO SCHOOL REFORM

ASK A RANDOM GROUP of people, “How do we improve our public schools?” and you’re apt to get divergent, passionate answers. Christians, like other citizens, have different opinions on how to heal what’s hurting in our education system. What we can share is a belief that all children are truly precious in God’s sight and an understanding that public education is a key component of the common good—that a healthy school system has the potential to bring opportunity and uplift to children regardless of their economic status. In the following articles, people of faith, united by their commitment to children but differing on some points of how to approach education reform, offer their perspectives.

EDUCATION AND THE WEALTH GAP

An advocate for public education argues that trying to make schools “race to the top” while ignoring the role of poverty and school inequality can’t bring the systemic change children need.

Jan Resseger is the minister for public education and witness with the national Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ. She spoke with Sojourners associate editor Julie Polter in June.

Sojourners: Why is public education a commitment for the United Church of Christ?

Jan Resseger: The commitment to education is a long tradition for us. Our pilgrim forebears brought community schooling and higher education to the New England colonies—New England congregationalism is one of our denominational roots. Another root is the American Missionary Association (AMA), an abolitionist society that grew out of the defense committee for the Africans on the slave ship Amistad. The AMA founded schools for freed slaves as a path to citizenship across the South during and after the Civil War.

Several denominations came together as the UCC in 1957, and our general synods since then have taken stands on issues such as the protection of the First Amendment in public schools and supporting school desegregation through the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s. From 1958 to the present, we have spoken to institutional and structural racism and classism in schools. We also have addressed privatization, because we’ve been strong supporters for many, many years of public schools as key to the strength of our society and democracy.

Nicholas Alan Cope/Getty Images



The achievement gap due to income inequality is nearly twice as large as the racial achievement gap.

What do you see as the key causes of troubled schools?

Sean Reardon from Stanford finds that the achievement gap due to income inequality is now nearly twice as large as the racial (black-white) achievement gap. If you compare the children of families in the top 10 percent by wealth and the bottom 10 percent by wealth, the gap is 30 to 40 percent wider among children born in 2001 compared to those born in 1975.

Between 2000 and 2007, residential segregation by income grew significantly. In 1970, only 15 percent of families lived in neighborhoods that were either predominantly wealthy or predominantly poor; today 31 percent live in those communities. Fewer people live in mixed-income communities.

We also have a 22 percent child poverty rate in the U.S., which is larger than in any other industrialized country. If you overlay the lowest-scoring schools identified by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act on an income map, you'll find there's a high correlation. The schools that are struggling most heavily are the schools in America's neighborhoods with the most poverty.

NCLB has put huge attention on outcomes—on test scores—and demanded that teachers raise those scores somehow, but it hasn't put enough emphasis on inputs, i.e. funding. It did not deliver the funding that was promised when it was passed. It has shifted the attention away from the kinds of things that were the subject of the school equity lawsuits for 40 years. We don't talk about our responsibility as a society and as citizens to be getting adequate funding to the poorest schools. We just talk about test scores. So you have this growing inequality in the society reinforced by growing inequality of capacity in public schools.

All children need a quality pre-K education, but now we have places cutting even kindergarten because of the financial crisis. We need incentives to draw the best-qualified teachers into the cities. We need strong curricula everywhere. We need equitable instructional resources. These are opportunity gaps that exist in the poorest communities, between what's available for children there and what's available in wealthier school districts. But we're not talking about that. And then we blame teachers

because they're not solving this problem for us.

In Naomi Klein's book *The Shock Doctrine*, she talks about "disaster capitalism," where we use natural catastrophes as an excuse to privatize things. Her big example is the privatization of the schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. There's been no natural disaster to public education, but NCLB created a sense of crisis. You read articles by people who will reference off the cuff that we have massively failing schools. People will talk about providing escapes for children trapped in those failing schools. That's not a constructive conversation. That's a *destructive* conversation. We need to support and help our struggling schools and communities where the schools are overwhelmed by challenges. That's our responsibility as citizens.

Is part of the problem that NCLB requirements weren't adequately funded?

Sen. Ted Kennedy lost faith in the bill, which he'd promoted, because it was inadequately funded. It took a little while for people to realize "Oh my gosh, we did not get what we thought we were getting at all. We've got huge collateral damage from this law."

Wealthy places put vast amounts of money in schools and poorer places can't,



while elsewhere children who are poor aren't getting the federal aid they need, limited as it was to begin with.

We've chased a lifeboat strategy. We're going to create special places where children can escape from the schools we've defined as failing, but we're not talking about how to improve schools for everybody.

Public schools serve 50 million students on a scale that's very difficult for most people to understand. So we're creating a few lifeboats, but we're not addressing the need to improve the schools that are going to continue to serve the mass of America's children.

A variety of factors contribute to underperforming schools. How do we deal with one of those elements, individual teachers who might be ill-suited for the job?

Ideally, there is due process set up when new teachers come into the classroom. Good administrators work those processes—we need to make sure administrators are counseling, educating, and forming teachers who are able and qualified to do what they need to do. The teachers' unions and the administrator groups all support strong mentoring programs for new teachers. Those programs ought to be in place everywhere. They aren't, because they're expensive and they get cut

Our narrative in the church isn't about rugged individualism. It's about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

and our states aren't equalizing it. Title I is a federal program created in 1965 to distribute money to schools serving children in places with either lots of poor children or high concentrations of poor children. Funds for Title I have been insufficient for some time.

But what's truly alarming to me, from a philosophical standpoint, is that the last two federal budgets have furthered the policies of Race to the Top [a U.S. Department of Education contest created to spur innovation and reforms in state and local district K-12 education] that have made funding competitive. Title I funding to many districts has been frozen while money is put into these competitions. "Winning" states get money

when funding is low, but they're very important programs. New teachers need to be able to get help from experienced mentors.

The teachers' unions (American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association) both promote strong peer review programs, where groups of peers come in and work with teachers. If teachers are not working out, they help counsel them out. Other teachers aren't supportive of rotten teachers. They know that their profession needs to be strong.

A lot of this comes back to funding. For example, if class size is reasonable, a teacher has a much better chance to be a good teacher. That's an expensive reform.

The most expensive, actually, and I think the most important. A kindergarten with 32 children is too large for the teacher to be effective. No matter how good the teacher is, it's just not going to work right.

What is the bottom line when talking about education reform?

Much of the education reform conversation today is about reforming schools one at a time, creating a model or best prac-

The schools that are struggling most heavily are those in neighborhoods with the most poverty.

tice that perhaps could be replicated. But public schooling in the U.S. is an enormous endeavor. There are 90,000 public schools, with 50 million children being educated in them. In the UCC, we're committed to looking for systemic justice. The laws and institutions of a society—including public schools, one of our primary institutions—can be a tool for the distribution of opportunity for all children.

To quote a National Council of Churches pastoral letter sent to President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in May 2010: "As a people called to love our neighbors as ourselves, we look for the optimal way to balance the needs of each particular child and family with the need to create a system that secures the rights and addresses the needs of all children."

That's a really important concept. School choice appeals to individuals; it assumes each parent is an independent member of the market. Public education has been understood historically in this country as a *public* endeavor. Justice is an aspect of the public; it's communal. Our narrative in the church isn't about rugged individualism. It's a narrative about loving our neighbors as ourselves. Public education is one way we can systemically do that, if we use the system and work for justice in the system, instead of small changes here and there. Because even if they can be replicated, unless they're made systemic, they don't really do what we need. ■



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Test Anxiety

How the out-of-control emphasis on high-stakes testing jeopardizes school reform.

THE SO-CALLED "ACCOUNTABILITY movement" has been a bipartisan movement; virtually no one is proposing that we cut back on standardized tests. They've come to dominate school for children and teachers, and they've narrowed the curriculum. They've caused people to feel pressure to cheat. While standardized tests have been emphasized less in schools where children are highly affluent—those children still get an enriched curriculum—children in schools that are poor get a heavily test-prep curriculum that's not very enticing.

At a higher level, standardized tests are at the core of the test-and-punish philosophy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). All the punishments are based on test scores; whether it's identifying failing schools and closing them if their scores are too low or giving teachers poor evaluations, and maybe firing them, based on student test scores—or whether it's the very draconian ways of dealing with the bottom 5 percent of schools in the NCLB waivers and Race to the Top grants, as Education Secretary Arne Duncan proposes.

High-stakes testing is at the core of what's wrong with where we're headed.

Because the stakes are so high, they've caused a narrowing of the curriculum. The tests required for NCLB are basic reading and math. They don't test social studies or the arts. Because the scores matter so much, they're driving policy all around it.

We know that student tests aren't designed to evaluate their teachers. Teaching is a hugely complicated endeavor of connection between students and teachers, and test scores may not reflect what's happening there and the benefits.

There are lots of ways to evaluate teachers—professional principals should be able to evaluate the teachers under them as professionals. We've come to trust numbers and data rather than professional expertise. That's nuts. It's a whole culture that's focused on data processing as if that can measure all our connections with each other. The assumption seemed to be that all teachers are lazy and not trying very hard and not holding high enough expectations, so if we pressure them enough, they'll get better. That's the assumption—that all these other factors that we know affect student achievement don't matter.

It's a totally arbitrary process that we've gotten ourselves into. This very artificial, mechanical approach doesn't fit with our understanding of a child, created in the image of God, who has potential that needs to be realized and nurtured. —Jan Resseger

Standardized tests are at the core of the test-and-punish philosophy of No Child Left Behind.



A FAITHFUL RESPONSE TO SCHOOL REFORM

BEYOND 'SUPERMAN'

Four traits of successful public school reform.

by NICOLE BAKER FULGHAM

I'VE BEEN INVOLVED in public education for more than 15 years—as an urban public school teacher, a researcher and policy analyst, a teacher trainer, a parent, and an advocate. I never dreamed I'd live to witness such raucous and juicy debates about how to improve our nation's lowest-performing public schools. Throughout my career, public education garnered the occasional feel-good story about a phenomenal, mythical “inner city teacher” and, more often, the litany of stories about how urban and rural schools are in complete disarray.

But during the last few years—oh my! We've witnessed the onslaught of message-laden documentaries such as *Waiting for “Superman”* and *The Lottery*, which are celebrated by many and derided as teacher-bashing propaganda by others. The birth of the “education reform” movement has generated such groups as Democrats for Education Reform, Students for Education Reform, and Stand For Children. Again, lauded by many, these groups are vigorously criticized by others because of the way they push against policies, structures, and institutions in public education.

Regardless of what side of the education reform debate we may choose, most Americans agree on one thing: Public schools *must* improve. The academic achievement gap between wealthy white students and low-income students of color must be eliminated. It's unconscionable that 50 percent of kids growing up in poverty drop out of high school.

How do we allow a system to exist where poor children in the fourth grade are already performing three grade levels behind children in wealthier neighborhoods? What future do we anticipate poor and minority children will have with these academic outcomes?

As a Christian, like many other people of faith, I'm propelled by my religious convictions to work on behalf of the most disenfranchised children. My biblical beliefs about poverty and inequity cause me to try and fix systems that perpetuate the inequities we see in public education. People of faith should be prophetic voices to lift up examples of what's possible in the face of seeming impossibility. Our Christian beliefs compel us to view all children as made in God's image and likeness—and there's no plausible way that God would give all of the academic skills and intellect to wealthy, white suburban children.

At first glance, this all seems like fairly benign stuff. The system isn't ensuring that all children fulfill their God-given academic potential. So why is today's public education reform so emotional and complex? What's happening with public education reform in this country, and how can faith communities play a role in bringing about much-needed change? Do we even dare to step into the debate? Unequivocally—yes. We must get involved; standing on the sidelines is no longer an option.

I believe we need to focus on two concepts in order to develop a faithful vision for public education reform: The What and The How.

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THE WHAT

The best way to identify what we need to reform in public education is to take lessons from highly successful teachers, schools, and school districts. Where is the achievement gap closing? Where do we see teachers, schools, and communities producing scholars who perform at incredibly high levels even when they're growing up in poverty? Those examples have to be our nation's blueprint for change because they're achieving success in the face of enormous challenge.

Fortunately, when we look across the nation we can find a growing number of outstanding low-income public schools that defy the odds every day. And they share several key traits:

1. HIGH EXPECTATIONS. Expect more, get more. High-performing schools and teachers embody this idea. They set meaningful, ambitious student achievement goals, track their progress toward the goals, and give students the support systems to get there. Education reform can create the conditions to support high expectations by clearly describing what high-quality academic success looks like; providing methods to evaluate student progress and academic growth throughout the year; and creating opportunities to extend the school day and school year to ensure students have the extra time needed to catch up.

2. SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY. These schools and classrooms don't play the blame game. Everyone is on the hook for ensuring student success. If a student is failing, teachers and schools don't blame parents or society (or vice versa). They look within to determine what they can do differently. Part of the solution may be engaging the student's parents more deeply or tackling a poverty-related issue such as hunger or access to health care. But they don't automatically place blame. They take ownership to find solutions.

3. HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TEACHERS. This cannot be emphasized enough. An individual teacher has enormous agency to improve a student's academic trajectory. Education reform must support the necessary conditions to recruit, train, hire, support, evaluate, and retain excellent teachers. Districts need

the freedom to recruit and hire high-quality teachers from multiple avenues. Principals need the autonomy to hire teachers who are the best fit for their individual schools. Teachers need regular multifaceted evaluations (including a wide variety of variables, such as the extent to which they've increased student achievement) and feedback that blends directly into meaningful profes-

It's unconscionable that 50 percent of kids growing up in poverty drop out of high school.

sional development. Teaching salaries in low-income public schools must be competitive to attract and retain talented educators instead of losing them to higher-paying suburban districts.

4. VISIONARY SCHOOL LEADERS. Just as excellent teaching matters, so does excellent school leadership. Visionary school leaders bring the innovation, courage, goal orientation, and strategic thinking necessary to turn around an entire school. We should give more flexibility and autonomy to school leaders who have demonstrated their effectiveness. Let's give these leaders the freedom to have an even greater impact on student achievement!

Christians do not need to become policy wonks or education experts to advocate for public education reform. We simply need to educate ourselves about what's going on in our local school district or at the state level. Where are the biggest disparities in student achievement in my local community? What's on the agenda for trying to close those gaps? And what's the most appropriate way to lend our voice as people of faith to ensure systemic education reform happens?

THE HOW

I've become increasingly convinced that The How of education reform is as equally important as The What. As people of faith, we should particularly strive to bring a level of humanity and compassion to the debate.

But here's the trick. Our compassion cannot be extended only to the millions of students whose public institutions have failed them. That's a no-brainer. We must also

extend compassion and understanding to the parents and families who struggle to raise children under the punishing weight of poverty and all the challenges it brings. We must also bring a sense of humanity and dignity to the public school teachers and administrators who wrestle with the intersection of academics, poverty, and race every day in their schools. Trying to "do reform" with-

out genuinely engaging with the very people whose interests we support isn't going to get us very far. And scapegoating one group, any group, as "the problem" limits our ability to foster transformational change.

As a resident of the Washington, D.C. area, I watched Michelle Rhee's education reform agenda with a mixture of glee, fear, admiration, and shouts of "You go girl!"—depending on the moment. Appointed chancellor of D.C. public schools in 2007 by then-Mayor Adrian Fenty, Rhee was given Fenty's full political support to enact sweeping reforms. There were much-needed improvements in school logistics and test scores (although D.C.'s State Superintendent of Education recently confirmed testing irregularities during her tenure). But Rhee was, to put it mildly, a polarizing figure, whose unpopularity among many in the African-American community is believed to be a major factor in Fenty's loss in the 2010 elections. Rhee subsequently left the D.C. public schools.

Many of us in the public education reform community were confounded. My friends and colleagues lamented: "But everything Rhee was doing made schools better for children of the same parents who voted against the reforms!" I'll admit I had those same initial reactions myself. As one who shares the urgency to bring transformational change to the millions of children stuck in failing schools, I strained to understand the negative reaction that Rhee seemed to spark with so many D.C. residents. After all, virtually all parents in low-income communities highly value education and want the best schools for their kids.

But as I've reflected on the education

reform movement over the past two years, I've come to understand why we often struggle to get traction in the communities where the achievement gap is the widest. As an African-American woman and a Christian, I have undergone my own process to unpack the unique and often deeply held beliefs of communities that have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised within public discourse. I've come to believe that we have to find authentic ways to give all stakeholders a voice in the dialogue and decision-making. Otherwise we run the risk of well-intentioned school reforms being viewed with heavy doses of skepticism by those left out of the process.

From a Christian framework, we should seek to be as inclusive as possible—pulling in others who might have different perspectives than ours and genuinely seeking to listen and to understand. Christians and other people of faith can be that moral voice and bridge-builder to ensure that this step truly happens. That approach will begin to build true allies for education reform and capitalize on the common ground we already share.

Does this mean we should shy away from difficult and potentially controversial decisions? Should we cease to push for education reform with a sense of urgency? Absolutely not. Education reform requires visionary leaders with the courage to push for real change—and not everyone may be happy with pushing against the status quo. Tinkering around the edges will not solve our problems. We must seek transformational, multifaceted reforms. And we cannot wait five years to do it. Every year we fail millions of children and teenagers by not providing them with a high quality education.

But if we want education reform to last and truly take root, we need to engage multiple stakeholders. Although overused, the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" is incredibly apropos when laying out strategy for urban school reform. Teachers and schools cannot do this alone. Education reform must include advocates from every sector: community leaders, business leaders, and faith-based leaders and congregations.

Nicole Baker Fulgham is founder and president of The Expectations Project (www.theexpectationsproject.org), which mobilizes people of faith to help close the academic achievement gap in public schools.

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A FAITHFUL RESPONSE TO SCHOOL REFORM

WHAT CAN CHURCHES DO?

Faith for Change seeks to support public education—without crossing the church-state divide • by ROMAL TUNE

JUST OVER A year ago, I attended a retreat sponsored by the Fund for Theological Education. During the retreat we were encouraged to look at our lives and to find a personal story that captured the essence of what led us to our particular ministries. That led me to reflect on my childhood: growing up in poverty, attending a different school every year, walking to school with cardboard in the bottom of my shoes because the soles were worn out, wondering how I was going to eat, lacking school supplies at times, and dealing with the stress of a single mother who was a substance abuser.

By reminding me of those things I endured and had to overcome as a child, that exercise helped me tap into my real passion. I wanted to find ways to help children growing up in similar circumstances. I wanted to inspire them to believe in themselves and know that they can make it.

At-risk youth and under-performing students need to be inspired, but equally important is their need for adults who are willing to do the work of helping them succeed academically. Education continues to be our most reliable tool for creating upward life trajectories and optimal opportunities. Churches are more than places where people come in search of a deeper relationship with God; they are also places where people come to find deeper connections with their communities and the possibility of using their gifts and talents to help those in need.

All these forces together compelled me to act on an idea I had more than a year ago: to call on friends from across the country to help create Faith for Change. Faith for Change builds a national network of churches and people of faith committed to implementing proven educational

strategies for improving children's lives.

In many cities people of faith are supporting public or charter schools. They are respecting the separation of church and state and don't seek to impose their belief systems on students, teachers, or other education professionals. The goal is not to convert but to encourage an ethic of academic excellence in our children, families, and communities through the provision of appropriate support, enthusiastic mentorship, and resources.

Faith for Change connects churches with the Coalition for Community Schools to help implement the "community schools strategy," which allows communities of faith to work with nonreligious organizations invested in the academic success of children. Similar work is taking place in communities of faith across the country. In New York City, Abyssinian Baptist Church has the Abyssinian Development Corporation. In Chicago, Lily Dale Baptist Church supports a high school across the street from the church. In Cleveland, a group of pastors led by Rev. Timothy Eppinger recently came together to work with teachers on improving graduation rates at a local high school; in Decatur, Ga., Dr. Cynthia Hale, pastor of Ray of Hope Christian Church, provides support for BaSix Knowledge Academy, a school for sixth- through 12th-grade students.

Around the country, churches run successful schools and provide support for children in and out of the classroom. In Chicago, Oklahoma City, Dallas, and Baltimore, we have worked with churches through our "we got your back" program to fill backpacks with school supplies for more than 3,000 students. Through our "graduation

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Students in Mentoring Tomorrow's Leaders Dropout Prevention Program in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, another Faith for Change program.

Faith for Change

ministry toolkit," we conduct trainings with churches, religious conferences, and denominational bodies that teach church leaders how to make their congregations into "no dropout zones." We recently conducted "graduation ministry" workshops at the Hampton Ministers Conference in Hampton, Va., and are scheduled to do the same at numerous upcoming national church conferences.

Churches can also support the work of dropout prevention by raising money to support schools in need of better technology or by providing scholarships to students in need for uniforms, tuition, etc. Through Faith for Change we have also created SWAG—Student With a Goal. This is a national campaign that promotes a positive message about education through the T-shirt line we developed. Proceeds from the purchase of these shirts support church programs that promote academic excellence, such as college tours, tutoring programs, after-school programs, technology for schools, and more.



Ryan Rodrick Beller

Next year we plan to launch programs that educate congregations on how to effectively engage their elected officials on political issues that impact the educational success of our children, locally and nationally. We will train them on education policy and what they can do to bring about needed changes in their communities.

The opportunities for churches and individual Christians to support the academic success of students are limitless when we allow our creativity and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to direct us.

Faith for Change started as a question: Would people of faith answer the call to serve their communities? The answer was that they already had. We hope to be a partner in this work to elevate these efforts and create national and global models of success. The work is too important to do it alone.

There are children in communities across the country waiting for someone to believe in them, support them, and provide them with resources and champion their causes. We must not be guilty of abandoning our children when they need us the most. ■

Romal J. Tune is founder and executive director of Faith for Change.

DAVE SCHERER (AGAPE*), MASTER OF ARTS STUDENT

By embracing an attitude of “come as you are”, Dave Scherer (AGAPE*) shares the gospel with teens through his hip-hop outreach ministry. As a Luther Seminary student, Scherer developed a deeper theological understanding to better equip young people with the message that God loves them and is active in their lives.



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**La Limonada, a community
in Guatemala City, where
Street Psalms participant
Tita Evertsz serves.**



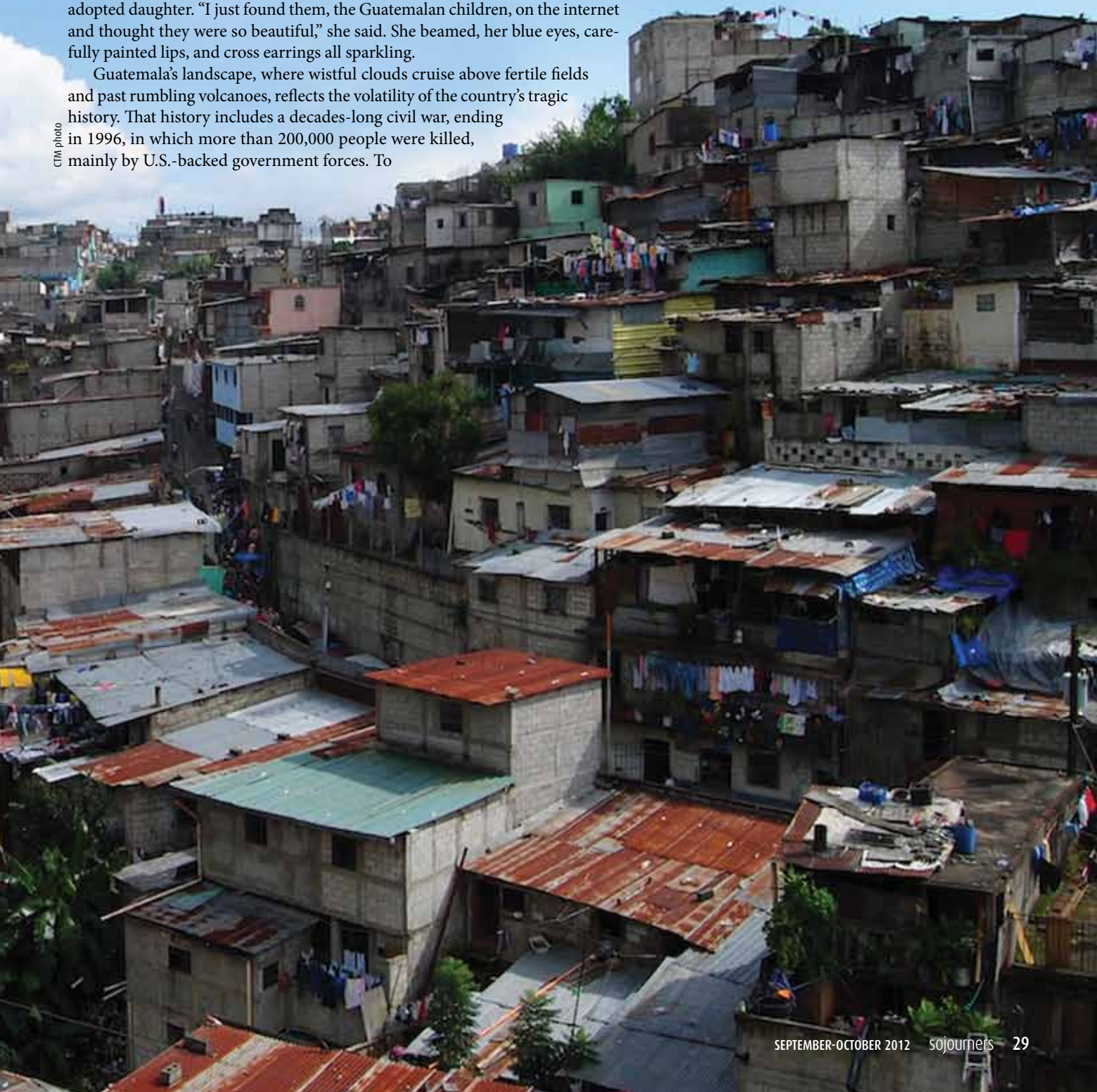
MISSION: TRANSFORMED

The Street Psalms community pursues theology from below—and that changes everything about how “missionary” work is done • by MICHELLE GARCÍA

ON A FLIGHT from New York City to Guatemala some years back, I met a woman from Oklahoma on her way to visit her soon-to-be internationally adopted daughter. “I just found them, the Guatemalan children, on the internet and thought they were so beautiful,” she said. She beamed, her blue eyes, carefully painted lips, and cross earrings all sparkling.

Guatemala’s landscape, where wistful clouds cruise above fertile fields and past rumbling volcanoes, reflects the volatility of the country’s tragic history. That history includes a decades-long civil war, ending in 1996, in which more than 200,000 people were killed, mainly by U.S.-backed government forces. To

CTM photo



Defying all rules of sanity and safety, he welcomed the gang members in.

visit the country is to experience not just that history, but also a culture that pioneered astronomy, devised an intricate written language, and erected engineering miracles. But, asked whether she intended to preserve her adoptive daughter's ties to her homeland, the woman I met on the plane said, "If she wants to see it, we'll bring her. But really, there's nothing there."

The attitude that "there's nothing there" is, all too frequently, the attitude of missionaries en route to Guatemala. But when Joel Van Dyke arrived in 2003 from Philadelphia, he suspected there was plenty there—there in the country's slums and in the cities' bursting garbage dumps, where thousands of people find sustenance every day. He set out to find what was there by learning to ask the right questions of gang members, slum dwellers, sex workers, and the local faith leaders who work with them. To do this, he told *Sojourners*, he had to adopt the attitude "let's go see what God is doing in the world and let *that* color and shape the theological discourse."

That guiding principle is behind all of the work of the organization Van Dyke works for: the Center for Transforming Mission (CTM), an international nonprofit that provides theological training, spiritual formation, and networking support for local religious leaders in the global South. Based in Tacoma, Wash., and founded by longtime urban ministry worker Kris Rocke, CTM offers resources to grassroots organizations in more than a dozen countries.

In nine of them—Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Kenya, Romania, and the U.S.—local leaders working among "those who have been wrongly labeled the least, last, and lost," as Rocke puts it, together form a "ragtag religious order" they call "Street Psalms: A Community of the Incarnation." Street Psalms begins with a three-year theological training made up of six units, or "intensives," which, along with spiritual formation, forges a team. "The way



Joel Van Dyke

we sustain poor people without silver or gold," says Rocke, "is through community." It's one committed, as the organization's website says, to "a shared life of action, reflection, and discernment." Members learn from each other by meeting, reading scripture together, and visiting each other's work sites.

STREET PSALMS' theology and community are born from the experiences of local leaders

whose journeys have led them to find "good news." For Guatemalan-born Tita Evertsz, the journey began one night years ago on a bus from San Diego to Tijuana as she fled her abusive husband with \$28 in her pocket, two young children, and another on the way. At the crossing into Mexico, an immigration officer asked for her entry visa; Evertsz, who had no papers to show, dug into her purse and prayed. When she looked up, he had left. She embraced her kids and wept. That's when a stranger did the unthinkable: She asked what was wrong and how she could help. The lady helped Evertsz find a motel, and soon she reconnected with her family, who arranged for her to continue home to Guatemala.

"I was wounded and hurt and confused. I had something inside pushing me to find God," Evertsz recalls. She began volunteering at a hospital in Guatemala City, where the nurses asked her to pray for a gang member in intensive care. Through him, she says, she discovered La Limonada, a sprawling slum where she began working with children, doing ministerial work and providing psychological guidance. Eventually she established two schools and a shelter for formerly abused and abandoned children. "The world sees [La Limonada's residents] as monsters, but [when you go] there you see human beings," she says, adding that their pain reflects the failings of those who judge them. "Because of lack of love, we fail to save them as children, which is why they arrive at where they do."

The road simply unfolded, she says—a path it seemed this solidly middle-class woman, now in her 50s, was destined to walk alone. "The perspective inside the church" was that "they don't believe there is hope" for residents of La Limonada, she says. "People don't want to go there." Five years ago, after

Center for Transforming Mission leaders from El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.



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some 13 years in La Limonada, she found Joel, and through him a community of some 30 people doing similar work: “Guatemalans fighting to create a better Guatemala,” she calls them, people who “spoke my language.” She was no longer alone.

Finding “good news in difficult places” and in the leaders who work there, says Van Dyke, is a journey illuminated by a scripture passage he holds dear: the story of Hagar in Genesis 16. As the Egyptian slave is running away, an angel calls her by name and asks, “Where have you come from and where are you going?” “Churches don’t take the time to do what the angel did in the Hagar story,” says Van Dyke. “He asks her this beautiful question of grace—‘tell me your story.’”

A “THEOLOGY FROM below,” he says, demands the recognition that “it’s Hagar that understands far more than the Abrahams and Sarahs.” After all, it’s Hagar who is visited by an angel in this passage. The gang member that Tita Evertsz prayed for years ago in intensive care—who himself later became a pastor—was her Hagar, and Tita became Joel’s, each revealing a message and sharing wisdom.

But embracing the principle behind Hagar means ceding the power and privilege missionaries often enjoy. Van Dyke and Rocke have often found themselves confronting the “toxic” method of evangelizing learned by many evangelists—“the paternalistic kind of evangelicalism that taught [many] to go into their communities and hit people over the head with the Bible,” as Van Dyke describes it. “It’s just another way of doing violence in the midst of all kinds of violence, this time in the name of Jesus.”

It is a practice so ingrained that when Edwin Luna, a former gang member and drug user turned pastor, was preparing to launch his own ministry in Guatemala City, he originally based it on the “traditional” thinking that the “church is a building and you go out and bring people” into it. Then two gang members showed up at his home. His first instinct was to offer them prayer. They prayed until a voice deep inside Luna whispered they didn’t come to pray; they came to ask for a favor. “When I asked, ‘what [do] you want?’ they said, ‘we want to live with you,’” he remembers. Against his better judgment, defying all rules of sanity and safety, he

welcomed them in. With that, eight years ago, began his mission with gang members.

Luna established the Iglesia Tesoros de Gracia (Church of Treasures of Grace)—but he found his traditional theology study offered little inspiration on the streets. “I was taught how to baptize someone,” he says. “But they didn’t show me how to win the person with a vision of the streets.” Through participating in CTM’s Street Psalms program and

“It’s a whole new way to read scripture—learning to take the stained glass off the text.”

community, Luna formed a theology that leans toward texts such as the story of Hagar or the horrific story of rape and dismemberment contained in Judges 19, studied for the pain they express and the message of hope they contain.

“The church doesn’t go to those stories because they don’t know what to do with them,” says Van Dyke. But Street Psalms participants “go to scripture together to give voice to pain,” which is “life-producing. It’s a whole new way to read scripture—learning to take the stained glass off the text.”

CTM HAS, IN ways big and small, challenged traditional missionary practice. In the summer, the organization hosts North Americans on two-week visits to communities in the global South—but it pointedly names these groups, some 15 a year, “vision trips,” not short-term “missions.” As Van Dyke wrote in CTM’s weekly “Word from Below” email last year, in “contrast to a ‘mission trip’ (centered on what an outsider is invited to come and ‘do’ in another culture), a vision trip focuses on the invitation for an outsider to come and ‘see’ what God is doing through local, grassroots leaders serving their own people in hard places.”

The effects of CTM’s approach have bubbled back home, including to Christian Reformed World Missions (CRWM), the 124-year-old missions agency that, along with CTM, helps fund Van Dyke’s work in Guatemala. CRWM director Gary Bekker says Van Dyke has “pushed [the organization] to whole new areas.” While service to the “least, last, and lost” is hardly new, says Bekker, Van Dyke’s “concentration and

vigor” stand out. “He’s taken it—not that it’s extreme—pretty deep,” says Bekker, praising Van Dyke’s “constant addressing and pushing on the fact that, even in prison, the gospel is for a whole person and for all dimensions of life.”

Van Dyke and Rocke’s theology and critiques, however, have come at a cost. Recently, they authored *Geography of Grace*, a book inspired by “a holy discontent” with a main-

stream-church “gospel that can unwittingly sow seeds of violence and despair among society’s most vulnerable members.” Their first publisher withdrew; according to Rocke, this was largely because of the book’s interpretation of the scene in Matthew 4 where the devil tempts Christ atop the pinnacle of the temple. In this passage, Rocke and Van Dyke find a Jesus who is invited, but refuses, to violently enter a violent church system, one promoting sacrifice over mercy.

“Our proclamation of the gospel is often a product of the power and privilege we enjoy,” Van Dyke and Rocke write in the book. (As it has been in the past; for example, the CRWM, when founded in 1888 to work with Indigenous Peoples in the U.S., was initially called the “Board of Heathen Missions.”) The story of mission—his own and others’—is, Rocke says, to start with the attitude, “‘here comes the white great savior,’ only to figure out that [the missionary] is the wounded one, is the crippled one.”

Van Dyke and Rocke introduce and conclude their book by emphasizing that their work is firmly based on a willingness to give up the power of unquestioned certainty. They submit themselves, they say, to the very real possibility that they are wrong. For now, though, in Guatemala and countries across three continents, they and others at the Center for Transforming Mission have committed themselves to the simple act of asking. ■

Michelle García (mg@michellegarciainc.com), a journalist based in New York City and Mexico City, is the director of the documentary *Against Mexico: The Making of Heroes and Enemies*.

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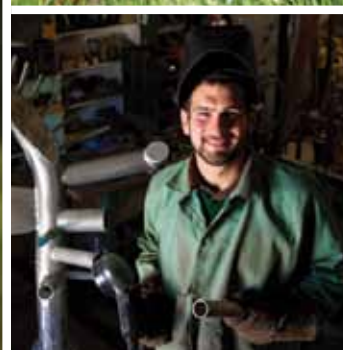
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BEHOLD, THE DREAMER COMETH

Paul Wellstone showed us that politics “by the people, for the people” is actually possible.

A FEW WEEKS after the October 2002 plane crash that killed Sen. Paul Wellstone, his wife, Sheila, their daughter, Marcia, and five others, a Lutheran confirmation class visiting D.C. from Minnesota decided to stop by Wellstone’s office to pay their respects. As the group went through security at the Senate office building, one of the students—who had worked on the senator’s re-election campaign and was still wearing a Wellstone button—set off the metal detector. The officer took her to the side to wand her. As he was checking her, the guard said, “Not one other senator in this place knows my name; Paul Wellstone knew my kid’s name.” He and the student hugged each other, and both started weeping.

Paul Wellstone touched people’s lives in profound ways, mostly because he genuinely sought to live a life of integrity, in both public and personal matters. He once advised, “Never separate the life you live from the words you speak,” and those who knew him best said he honestly tried to follow that advice. (A Midwest political observer said the Right never knew what to do with Wellstone, because he lived “conservative values” at home while working for progressive change in the public sphere.)

Wellstone’s political career began when, as a political science professor at Minnesota’s Carleton College, he started working with farmers to block electric lines forcibly run through their farms—and he continued to organize and agitate on behalf of regular people for the rest of his days.

Bob Hulteen, a longtime Minneapolis-based activist (and a former *Sojourners* editor), said that Wellstone respected people more deeply than “any politician, or church leader, I’ve

ever met—and, maybe most important, he didn’t take himself too seriously.” But Wellstone never underestimated the seriousness of his work for a better world, which is why, a decade after his passing, we asked several people who have been touched by his life in various ways to offer their thoughts on the legacy of a man who continues to offer a model of inspiration, integrity, and hope—attributes that are profoundly needed, in this and any election season. —**The Editors**

“Sometimes, the only realists are the dreamers.”

—Paul Wellstone



Paul Wellstone and his wife, Sheila, on the campaign trail in Minnesota.



'Stand Up and Keep Fighting'

Why Paul Wellstone wasn't "once-in-a-lifetime."

WE LISTENED, IN my high school health class, as Minnesota Public Radio confirmed that Sen. Paul Wellstone, his wife, Sheila, their daughter, Marcia, and five others had died in a plane crash in northern Minnesota. Very quickly, a common sentiment began to echo from caller to caller: "Paul was once-in-a-lifetime." So we sat there, a room full of stunned teenagers, hearing that we could never hope to see—or *be*—another leader like Paul Wellstone.

That refrain—a lament in the truest sense—was repeated throughout the following days and weeks, in moments of despair. Each time I heard it, I got more frustrated. I felt that same deep sadness, but I refused to believe that my generation had lost the right to expect more of our leaders and be leaders of integrity ourselves.

There were other voices and other refrains as well. True to Paul's call to "Organize, organize, organize!" these voices were strongest when we came together. Yes, we came together to mourn and share in our collective grief; but together, the idea that there could never be another Paul or another Sheila gave way to real wisdom: Stand up, keep fighting.

Toward the end of his life, Monseñor Oscar Romero assured his supporters (and those who threatened his life) that he would "rise in the Salvadoran people." And he did. In a similar way, in the wake of the Wellstones' deaths, dozens of committed, passionate, and still-grieving people came together to pick up the torch and insist that Paul and Sheila Wellstone would not—could not—be once-in-a-lifetime. Dozens became hundreds, then thousands trained in organizing, advocacy, and campaign management through Wellstone Action's Camp Wellstone program.

Ten years later, the hard work continues and the grief is still there. Yet so is the wisdom and the fire that Paul left us. The progressive vision that shaped his work as an organizer, professor, and U.S. senator still informs and drives our calling today—sometimes in unexpected ways. Every time I walk past my boss's office, the lone bumper sticker on the door reminds me, in Paul's words, that "We all do better when we all do better." That vision is why we stand up and keep fighting. —Korla Masters

Korla Masters lives in Minneapolis and works with Minnesotans United for All Families.

'We Can Remake the World Daily'

Thoughts from Paul Wellstone.

"I don't think politics has anything to do with left, right, or center. It has to do with trying to do right by people."

"If we don't fight hard enough for the things we stand for, at some point we have to recognize that we don't really stand for them."

"The American polity is infected with a serious imbalance of power between elites and masses, a power which is the principal threat to our democracy."

We Are Paul's Legacy

We were one in grief. Now we're one in purpose.

ABOVE THE COMPUTER in my office is a picture of Paul and me. In many ways, I am part of his legacy.

Like many who knew him, I met Paul when I was a student at Carleton College. Having grown up in a small town in rural Minnesota, my vision was fairly narrow as I walked onto campus that first time. I wanted to be a research physicist, and I was pretty committed to putting my years at Carleton to good use by squeezing out every last drop of education I could get. No interruptions please.

It took me more than a year and a half to realize that I could not ignore the world around me. Whatever academic course I was to pursue, I had to start claiming a public life or there would simply always be good reasons to put it off. While I have sometimes commented from my Lutheran pulpit that it's a bit ironic that three Jewish professors most shaped the direction of my life after college, certainly Paul was at the center. Over the next couple years, he became a crucial mentor for me and, more than that, he taught me how to live out my values with deep integrity. What's remarkable is that I wasn't particularly rare. Paul mentored hundreds of students into lives of greater conviction and purpose before he even ran for the Senate.

So what is his legacy? I think it's pretty simple. Paul believed intensely in people. He believed in a world of abundance, not scarcity, though perhaps he wouldn't have used exactly those words. He truly believed in politics as an extraordinary tool for the common good. He was an organizer, a weaver of disparate communities into a strong fabric of shared purpose. While he lambasted corporations and the consolidation of power in the hands of the few, he always believed that together, people could prevail. And he wanted every group of marginalized people to join him.

More than just believing any of these grand ideas, he lived them out. He strategically and systematically invited community after community to join him, to test the waters, to see what it feels like to organize around shared values.

When the first news came of Paul's plane going down, I was called to his office, and I stayed all day. His legacy showed up. The Hmong community, the Somali community, the African-American community, the LGBT community, old and young, Lutherans, Catholics, Jews, Unitarians—we were all one in grief. And, thanks to Paul, we were all one in purpose. And we still are. —**Doug Mork**

Rev. Doug Mork, a former labor organizer, is lead pastor at Cross of Glory Lutheran Church in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota.

Wellstone truly believed in politics as an extraordinary tool for the common good.

A Witness for Peace

In Wellstone's last major speech, he rose up against the "costly mistake" of the Iraq war.

IN SUMMER AND early fall 2002, the war drums of the Bush administration were beating on Iraq. Sen. Paul Wellstone was in a close race for re-election, and he knew the political risk of opposing the war resolution. But even if it were to cost him his Senate seat, he was determined to stick by his principles, one of which was to use diplomacy and build multilateral cooperation rather than go to war.

On Oct. 3, Wellstone rose on the Senate floor to deliver what would be his last major speech. He condemned plans for a "pre-emptive, go-it-alone military action in Iraq," and posed questions about the consequences of possible U.S. actions, in particular about the "possible loss of life that could result from our actions"—for "U.S. soldiers and innocent Iraqis"—concluding that a war "could be a costly mistake for our country."

Although his warning was not heeded and proved tragically correct, it remains a powerful reminder. Ten years later, we face a situation of ongoing or increasing U.S. involvement in wars around the world—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia—and threatened interventions in Syria and Iran. The major international cooperation in those areas is cooperating in wars, and serious diplomacy takes second place. Courageous voices such as Wellstone's are in short supply. Elected leaders who put their convictions ahead of ideology and party are nearly extinct.

Paul Wellstone combined personal integrity and political ethics in a way unusual in American politicians. In his book *The Conscience of a Liberal*, he wrote about both. Personally: "We should never separate the lives we live from the words we speak. To me, the most important goal is to live a life consistent with the values I hold dear and to act on what I believe in." Politically: "Politics is about the improvement of people's lives, lessening human suffering, advancing the cause of peace and justice in our country and in the world."

Since his death, I've had a bumper sticker hanging in my office that reads: "What Would Wellstone Do?" On many issues over these last 10 years, it has been a useful reminder of his integrity and ethics, and a touchstone to emulating them. —**Duane Shank**

Duane Shank is senior policy adviser at Sojourners.





'Pay it Forward'

The day we lost Wellstone was the day my life began.

IN SPRING 2002, I was well on my way to becoming an early-childhood special education teacher. After graduating from the University of Minnesota with a degree in child psychology and American Indian studies, I planned to work for a year and then go back to school to get my master's in special education. Little did I know that God had other plans for me.

I was driving past the Wellstone for Senate campaign office in summer 2002 and something told me to stop. I thought, "I really like Paul Wellstone; maybe I should volunteer." I walked in the door and was greeted enthusiastically. I sat down with complete strangers for two hours stuffing and licking envelopes for a fund-raiser. It was the most fun I'd had in a long time.

What struck me most when I walked into that office were the people. They looked like Minnesota. There were young people, seniors, veterans, people of color, immigrants, and at least one Native American (me). Needless to say, I went back every day after work. My volunteer duties changed as the campaign progressed. Toward the end, I was leading the organizing effort in the urban American Indian community. I was surrounded by people who were invested in my leadership development and loved the community we were building.

By fall 2002, it was clear that we were going to win the re-election campaign. We had built the largest grassroots volunteer operation in the history of the state. But on Oct. 25, just 11 days before the election, we lost Paul Wellstone, his wife, Sheila, their daughter Marcia, his driver, two campaign staffers, and the two pilots in a plane crash. The world had stopped and I couldn't catch my breath.

Former Vice President Walter Mondale was selected to run in Paul's place. With less than two weeks to campaign and little money left, we came together as a community. One day, while making home-made signs with a bunch of kids, ink covering our hands and arms, I paused to look around the room. I thought to myself, "This is what I'm supposed to do for the rest of my life."

The day we lost Paul Wellstone was the day that my life truly began. Out of the tragic loss, we started Wellstone Action, the largest progressive training organization in the country. I've been fortunate to work for the organization for almost seven years. We've trained more than 50,000 people across the country to make change in their communities, to continue the work of Paul Wellstone. I'm grateful I was able to work for a man who was truly "one of us," and now that I have the opportunity, I have to pay it forward. —**Peggy Flanagan**

Peggy Flanagan, a member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, is director of external affairs at Wellstone Action.

'We Can Remake the World Daily'

Thoughts from Paul Wellstone.

"The future will belong to those who have passion and are willing to work hard to make our country better."

"What makes community organizing especially attractive is the faith it places in the ability of the poor to make decisions for themselves."

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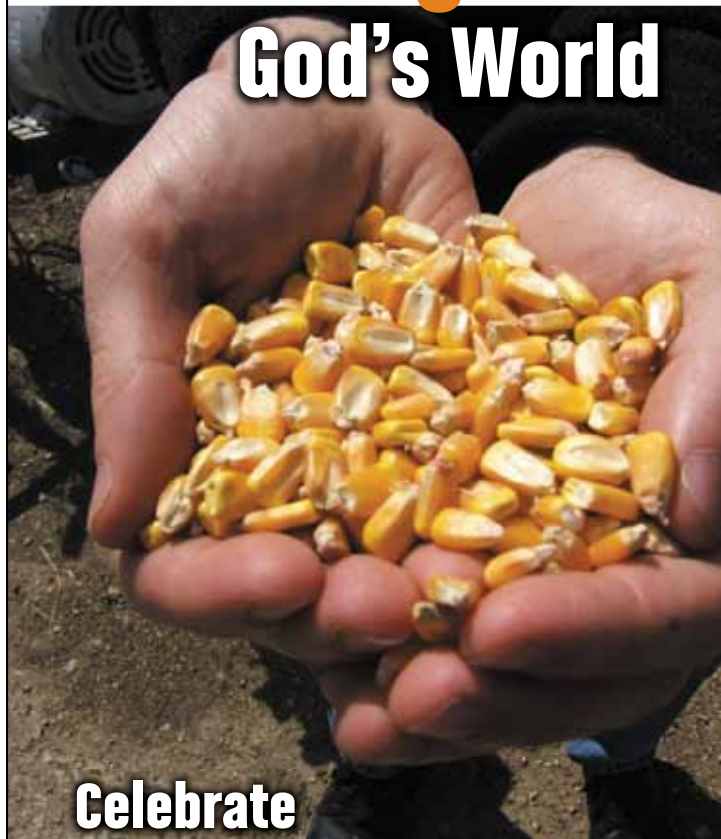


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Reading Ayn Rand at the Hospital

About love she was all wrong,
the old capitalist, patron saint
of the self-made rich. How well
she misunderstood the paradox deep
as mothers' grief: that finding our self
requires losing it, that love and loss
make one truth, not two. Objective
as granite in relationships, her hero
never collapses into cancer with a wife,
never drops into death with a brother.
No, Howard Roark, fountainhead
among architects, never really suffers
because he never truly loves. He relates
in a Randian arithmetic of negation:
one self living for another self equals
no self. Devoted to one ego alone, his
will is rigid as the steel girders he
sketches across the vast unknown. I
turn another tedious page, count
what's left to read, then gaze
out the window to worry
what my wife's biopsy will mean.
Beside me since sunrise, our daughter Mary
sets aside a limp issue of *People*,
ruffles my hair, then pours me coffee,
strong, steaming—just as John Donne
in slippers hustles his IV pole
down the corridor, his free hand clutching
the breezy back of a worn hospital gown. He
hurries to our chairs, bows to Mary
with metaphysical flourish, then whispers
through a painful grimace to me,
“Look, son: for your wife's sake
lose that damned book!” Ducking
behind a lush fern to avoid his nurse,
the ailing Dean of Meditation 17
grabs my sagging shoulders, leans
in that long English face to declare,
“Now listen, you: Ayn Rand's all wrong.
Got that? No man's an island. Period.
And you can take that to the bloody bank.”

Jon Boyes

*Mark Hiskes teaches English at
Holland Christian High School in
Holland, Michigan.*



THE LAMB AND THE BEAST

**Revelations abound when refugees study
the Bible's last book.**

WHEN A GROUP of refugees from Burma who attend my church in Melbourne, Australia, asked me to co-lead a study of the book of Revelation last year, at first I was apprehensive. After all, the book is strange and confusing. Many, including Martin Luther, have asked whether it's even necessary to include it in the New Testament. But, as our group plunged into Revelation's mysterious depths, I was to learn that, unlike Western Christians, praying refugees readily see its lessons about the powers of evil—social, political, spiritual, and personal—and the decisive struggle that the Son of God mounts against them.

The 18 young women and men in the study, who ranged from 16-to-24-years old, were members of the Karen ethnic group. The civil war in their home region of Burma has, over decades, resulted in massive displacement and suffering. In recent years thousands of Karen people have resettled in the U.S. and other countries, including Australia. (Although current political developments in Burma raise cautious hope of eventual peace, at present fighting continues in Karen State and other areas inhabited by ethnic minorities.)

Leading the study of Revelation with me was Thara Nonoe, a Karen man in his mid-50s highly esteemed in the community for his skills in imparting knowledge and writing poetry. ("Thara," which means "teacher," is a Karen title of respect.) The young always listen to him keenly. Our six-part study was a segment of a two-year series of lay

Photos by Reuters

Munane, a 90-year-old Karen refugee, begs for rice for herself and her disabled granddaughter at a refugee camp near the Thai-Burmese border.





A Karen child and his mother watch from inside a house at a refugee camp in Burma's Karen State.

Reuters

in Revelation. They believe, for example, that only 144,000 people will be saved. Also, some young Karen in Australia had recently seen the movie *2012* and were disturbed and confused by its graphic images of an end time. As Thara Nonoe and I emphasized that Revelation is a dream—a vision John saw and wrote down—the young people in our study, initially preoccupied with whether to take

feel clarity about why worship is so deeply important to them: In worship, they stand by promise on the threshold of the fulfilled Kingdom. As oppressed communities sing “holy, holy, holy” while celebrating the Eucharist, they resonate with the angels around the heavenly throne.

Like the seven churches addressed in the first three chapters of Revelation, Christian refugees also face the colossus of radical evil. Many of our group members had been affected by acts of sheer violence, either directly or in the telling of family members. One study participant, when he was only 7 years old, had seen family members gunned down when the Burmese military suddenly entered his village.

Refugees too, like the writer of Revelation, sometimes have visions of the risen Christ, mercifully given in times of imprisonment and torture. One of the Karen church leaders gave his witness to us by describing how, when he was 19 years old, he was falsely accused of being “a troublemaker,” tied to a tree for 15 days, and mocked at gunpoint. During this torment he had a vision of Christ appearing to him

religious education. As I prepared, I was haunted by Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost: “In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit” (Acts 2:17). Pentecost signifies that the last days have arrived, in fulfillment of the words of the prophet Joel. In my mind, these words have particular reference to oppressed believers such as Christian refugees.

From the outset of the study, members pondered with quiet fascination the fact that Revelation’s writer, John, can be seen as a refugee. To escape persecution, he has fled to the island of Patmos, probably from Ephesus, one of the seven churches to whom he writes. Was he joined at Patmos by other Christians? Did he live with others in a camp of vulnerable, temporary dwellings and in severe poverty—like refugees today? Like the Karen people who have lived for decades in camps along the Thai-Burmese border, where, as in their home villages, they were still exposed to possible attack? Like the young people in our study group, many of whom were born in those camps? “This book must be especially for us,” one of them commented.

THE GROUP HAD asked for a study on Revelation in order to respond to various temptations to misread the book. An ironic plus of refugee camp life is that young Christians have time to become familiar with much of the Bible; some religious groups among the Karen have come to emphasize a literal interpretation of the numbers

the book’s numbers literally, were freed to see them as symbolic of present and future truths.

Nonoe and I began the study by simplifying. The book is meant to be read out loud in one sitting, we reminded the group: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear

John paints a picture, wild and determined, of the final conflict between God and the forces of evil.

and who keep what is written in it” (1:3). For the persecuted church members to whom Revelation was addressed, John paints a picture, wild and determined, of the final conflict between God and the massive forces of evil that persist on the Earth. We urged the group not to get stuck among all the swirling images, but to imagine a child sitting with a group of adults and, after hearing the whole drama of the book, exclaiming, “Isn’t it wonderful that the Lamb defeated the Beast!” The group quickly adopted this remark as a kind of refrain, which they repeated with vigor to commence each of the following sessions.

With the One seated on the throne, chapters four and five proclaim, Christ the Lamb is to be worshipped. Young Karen Christians know this truth in their bones—Christian refugees cling to and revel in corporate praise, the only thing that cannot be taken away from them. Reading these passages of Revelation, group members began to

in the jungle, as total reassurance that his life was in God’s hands.

APOCALYPTIC REASSURANCE, in the face of violence and even death, moves to the heart of the gospel message that Christ is present with his suffering people. Thousands of Karen people have died untimely and cruel deaths due to oppression.

Nonoe reminded the group that Karen church tradition teaches that, when we die, we “rest in Jesus” in paradise, awaiting the new heaven and new earth. The departed are in the company of the martyrs who, under God’s altar, pray for the continuing struggle of faith and witness of those still on earth (6:9). We have a bond with those who have died, Nonoe commented: We will all enter the fulfilled kingdom together after the journey of shared faith and costly witness. We go in the crowd.

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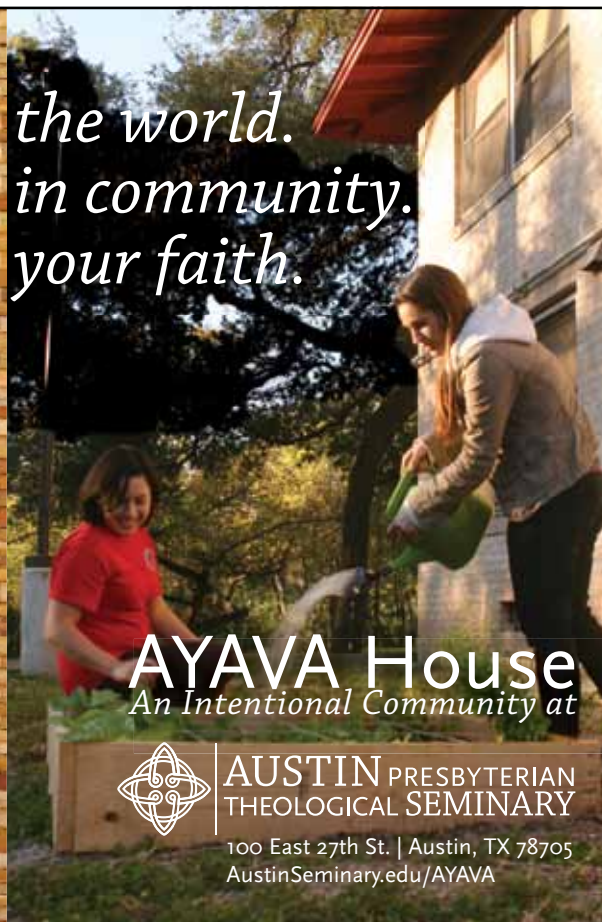
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is, I thought. Here there is none of the glib, sweetened message, presented in most Western churches, of Christian souls one by one entering a heaven above at the point of their death.

Symbolically, John uses the number seven to depict the completeness of the end times now begun: seven seals, seven trumpeters, seven bowls. The conflict involves a process of judgment and an end. John also writes about the Beast, the seemingly invincible creature who is allowed to make war on God's people (13:4-7). The temptation to lose courage in the face of the Beast's power is countered by the repeated vision of the peacemaking, victorious Lamb: "Isn't it wonderful," as we reminded ourselves, "that the Lamb defeated the Beast!"

The group was now prepared to get a handle on the violence described in later chapters. Although all the young people had either directly experienced violence or were affected by family stories, they could only rarely speak of these experiences. Reassurance and a renewal of faith in the face of violence were critically important for them. It surprised us to note, with the help of commentaries such as M. Eugene Boring's *Revelation*, that this kind of reassurance can be found, with a right reading, even in Revelation's most cataclysmic passages. The images of earthquakes, plagues, and other disasters, far from presenting indiscriminate, large-scale devastation by a vengeful God, actually point to the rock-like firmness of God's victory in saving the world.

The Lamb, and all who follow him, witness to God's triumph. Corrupt economic systems, war-mongering, and the principalities and powers will all fall. Faithful Christians may faint and even be martyred, but the Lamb will reinvigorate them for the spiritual fight for justice, as the martyrs now in paradise cry "how long?" (6:10).

THE GROUP ALSO considered the idea that John's vision calls Western Christians to be in solidarity with oppressed peoples and to learn from them. In chapters 21 and 22, the glory of God shines like a beacon, encouraging all faithful communities who are struggling. We need to hold on to the vision of the new heaven and new earth, when peace and harmony will be manifested throughout creation and the redeemed will

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be gathered in: There is “the healing of the nations.” In the present time, the vision grants hope to sustain those who struggle. Western Christians can learn this way of hope vividly from the witness of refugees.

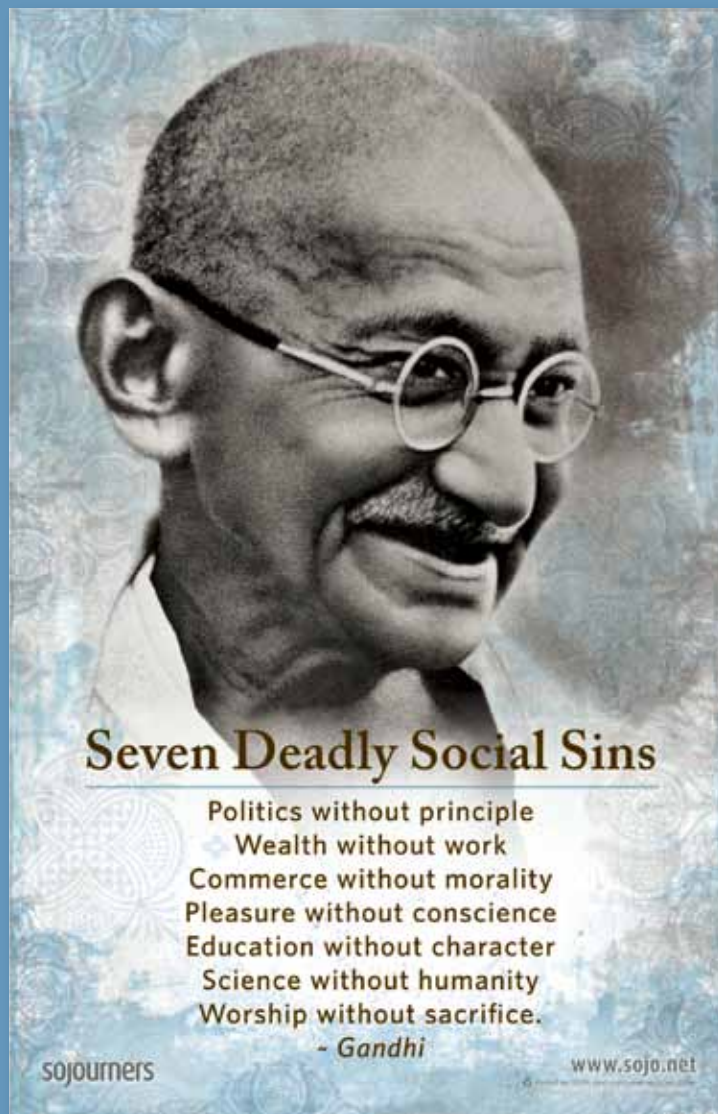
Early on in the study, the question arose: How should Karen refugees now in Australia live “in a strange land”? While the young people’s faith and worship are strong, they are also tested by living in a Western country. As one girl in the group put it, “We live with material privilege we didn’t imagine before. We have all the food we want, good clothes, and many of us even own a car that we are slowly paying off. Is this what freedom is all about? We can become a bit indifferent about our religion and start to forget the suffering of our people. What helps us is to get together and remember our own people. They are still in danger, in Burma and in the camp. Not long ago we were like birds in a cage too.”

Clearly, following the Lamb means living by the Beatitudes. It means not being afraid. And it also means recognizing in Australia the marks of the Beast and of the Lamb.

At this point the group embarked on an exercise: Members took recent newspaper clippings and indicated whether their stories belonged to the Beast or to the Lamb. “Beast!” they shouted loudly when they saw images of excessive wealth, models in extravagant clothes, and read about the excessively long detention of asylum seekers. “The Lamb!” they declared firmly and tenderly of clippings depicting welcome of strangers, answered prayer, educational opportunities, and daily acts of kindness. The exercise was a form of both exorcism and loving prayer.

Every meeting concluded with singing: “Thank you God our Father / For giving us your Son / And sending forth your Spirit / Till our work on earth is done.” I have been a fellow traveler with the Karen community for many years, but the study greatly deepened my appreciation of the Karen people’s plight and dignity and of God’s power in weakness. ■

Ron Browning, an Australian Anglican priest, has been ministering among Karen people from Burma for the past 10 years. He works both in refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border and with those resettled in Australia.



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The cast of "A Song for Coretta," by Pearl Cleage—an Agape Theatre Troupe presentation at the Lexington (Ky.) Opera House—includes founder Cathy Rawlings, far right.

By Jason Howard

STAGE PRESENCE

Kentucky theater company founder Cathy Rawlings lifts up black culture.

THE CHOIR AT Lexington, Kentucky's Imani Missionary Baptist Church is revving up for worship, focusing on things above as the cry of the organ and dissonant blues riffs of the piano fill the large, modern sanctuary. The director gives Cathy Rawlings the signal, and she strolls out in front. As they launch into the spiritual "I'm Glad," she closes her eyes and offers up a silent prayer. Satisfied, she takes the microphone and begins to recite a poem, "The Creation" by famed Harlem Renaissance poet James Weldon Johnson:

*And God stepped out on space
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely—
I'll make me a world.*

Published in 1920 and written as a tribute to African-American religious oratory, "The Creation" occupies a hallowed place in black American culture. In the poem, God seems to take on the style of a black preacher, walking around, emphasizing

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When God Talks Back



by forming the Agape Theatre Troupe, a nonprofit, all-volunteer group dedicated to preserving African-American culture in the Bluegrass State and entertaining the public at large. Founded in 2000 as Imani's Family Life Center Theatre, the troupe's roots can be traced back to experiences Rawlings had as an actress with the Actors Guild of Lexington, where she received

"This is not a play. God is real."

—Cathy Rawlings

three Raymond A. Smith Excellence in Theatre Awards for her performances in "Yellowman," "The Old Settler," and "The Vagina Monologues."

"I had been in an Actors Guild production connected with the Roots and Heritage Festival—that's an African-American festival that happens here in Lexington every year," Rawlings explains. "The director at Actors Guild thought it was important to connect with the African-American community. I think the first all-black production was in '96. I auditioned for that and got a part. Not many black people came to the show. They did another show, which I was in, and again there was such a struggle to get black people to attend."

Disappointed by the small African-American turnout, Rawlings began contemplating that community's apparent lack of connection to the theater arts. "A lot of black people in the area hadn't been exposed to theater," Rawlings says. "Then along came Tyler Perry [the film writer/director, known for the *Madea* series, started his career with touring stage productions], which is not theater but entertainment—so a lot of black people think that's theater, but it's not. I was asked to do a play for a fundraiser, and it had a great turnout. I found ... that for 90 percent of the audience, that was their first time seeing a play. That's when I said, 'Wow—there's a need for it.'"

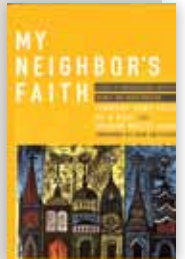
Enter the Agape Theatre Troupe. For dramatic talent, Rawlings turned to the most creative place she knew: the church choir. She then mounted a well-received production of "Flyin' West." But she quickly found

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New & Noteworthy

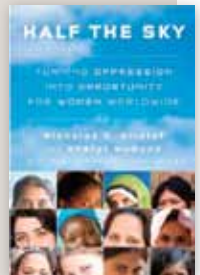
ACROSS SACRED FENCES

More than 50 contributors offer moving, insightful personal essays about interfaith experiences in *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*. Edited by Jennifer Howe Peace, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley. Orbis Books



WOMEN RISING

On Oct. 1 and 2, PBS will air the two-part special *Half the Sky*. Inspired by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's best-selling book of the same name, the film follows the authors through 10 countries to meet people challenging extreme gender inequality and the poverty, trafficking, and violence it perpetuates. pbs.org/independentlens

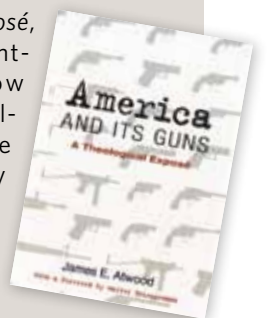


CARING FOR CREATION

Katharine K. Wilkinson explores the growing movement of evangelicals engaged in environmental activism in *Between God & Green: How Evangelicals Are Cultivating a Middle Ground on Climate Change*. Oxford

REBUKING THE GUN EMPIRE

James E. Atwood is a pastor, avid hunter, and longtime activist against gun violence. In *America and Its Guns: A Theological Exposé*, he writes thoughtfully about how American gun culture has become a kind of idolatry and how people of faith can—and must—challenge it. Cascade Books



specific syllables, and pausing for breath at particular points during the creation story.

People across the sanctuary are responding to Rawlings' impassioned rendition, lifting their hands and interspersing her pauses with shouts of praise. By the time she comes to the part where God breathes life into humanity, "Like a mammy bending over her baby," many are in tears. Even with long experience in music and on the stage, Rawlings herself is overcome with emotion.

"It's just hard to get through it without just breaking down," she recalls later, "without just shouting and rejoicing, because God is real." She shakes her head as punctuation. "This is not a play. God is real."

Now in her 50s, Rawlings has spent most of her life in church choirs. But she has also taken her commitment to music and to the stage beyond the church doors

Roots of the Common Good

LATELY I'VE been on a campaign to read some of the classic novels that I should have read decades ago. This summer it's been John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. There, I confessed it. All these years I've been coasting on repeated viewings of the John Ford film adaptation. But I'm reading the original now. And despite the hunger and hardship faced by the Joad family, I find myself experiencing nostalgia for those old hard times.

Americans fell into the Great Depression of the 1930s without the safety net of unemployment insurance, food stamps, or federally insured bank deposits. In fact, victims of the current depression have those benefits because of the things their ancestors did 80 years ago. Back then, Americans pulled together with the sure belief that we are all responsible for each other and that no one of us can, or should, stand alone. They recognized that a

Solidarity may be all but dead in our politics, but it still lives around the edges of our culture.

common plight required common action, and they gave us a trade union movement and a New Deal.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, that recognition is rooted in the primary value of family solidarity, which grows to include neighbors and co-workers, and, finally, in Tom Joad's famous speech, extends to all people struggling for justice ("whenever they's a fight so hungry people can eat"), and even to all humanity, past and present ("maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of").

Obviously, that sense of solidarity is hard to find in 21st century America. Today's Joads, while also motivated by family values, are more likely to blame their problems



on big government and to vote for free-market fundamentalists who will cut taxes on the rich.

Solidarity may be all but dead in our politics, but that forgotten country—the one inhabited by the likes of Tom Joad—still lives around the edges of our culture. In fact, I glimpsed it just a few days ago at a music festival in Owensboro, Ky., headlined by

Old Crow Medicine Show and the Carolina Chocolate Drops, two groups that have given up on the contemporary American scene and planted their flag instead in the deeper soil of traditional

music and culture.

Old Crow is a group of young (or youngish) white men who play music from the old-time string band tradition that predates the country music industry, and even recorded music. Their early recordings leaned heavily on traditional string band numbers, but more recently they've focused on writing original material that fuses their influences and brings them to bear upon the contemporary scene. They are capable of the Steinbeckian Big Statement. One of their songs flatly proclaims, "We're all in this thing together, walking a line between faith and fear." When I saw them

in Owensboro, they played about half of their new album, *Carry Me Back*, and all but one of those songs dealt with political and economic traumas inflicted upon rural working people—from the collapse of domestic tobacco farming to having the family homestead flooded by the federal government to a Virginia boy's death in the last Iraq war.

The Carolina Chocolate Drops are even more unusual. They are young African Americans on a crusade to revive a long-moribund black string band tradition. In the process, they are exposing the common DNA shared by African and European Americans. This leads to surprising combinations such as Chocolate Drop Rhiannon Giddens singing a song entirely in Scottish Gaelic, accompanied by hip-hop style beatboxing.

So maybe there is still hope for America in 2012. If there is, it is where it has always been, in our capacity to empathize with one another and to recognize our common origins and common fate. ■

Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. His latest book is the novel *White Boy*.



Continued from Page 47

that her audiences wanted music. “That’s what black people expect,” she howls with infectious laughter. “If you’re not singing, it’s nothing.”

Rawlings drew on her extensive musical experience to write and direct plays with a spiritual message that incorporated the sounds of the black church: “Above My Head,” “Church, Roll On!” and “At the Crucifixion: A Play for the Easter Holiday.” But the troupe’s watershed moment came with its September 2009 production of playwright Elyzabeth Gregory Wilder’s “Gee’s Bend” at the Lexington Opera House. Set in the isolated hamlet of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, and interspersed with haunting gospel songs, the play recounts the story of Sadie, a young mother who joins the Selma civil rights march in 1965, against her husband’s express wishes. When she comes home beaten to a pulp, he locks her out of the house to teach her a lesson, leading her to realize that she can raise money for bus fare north and escape her life in the South by selling her handmade quilts. The success of the one-night-only engagement—the 940-seat opera house was nearly sold out—sent a clear message to Rawlings, she told the *Lexington Herald-Leader* the following year: “It told me that the community was ready for a mainstream African-American theater.”

Next on the bill was Rawlings’ ambitious production of her original play “The Duke, the Women, the Music,” a musical based on the female singers in Duke Ellington’s legendary band, in December 2010. Featuring the vocal talents of eight women, the play was both entertaining and informative, with swanky musical numbers and tales of the era’s racism. The troupe followed that up with “Voices of Freedom,” a series of monologues adapted from the narratives of slaves living in the Lexington region in the 18th and 19th centuries. But the genius of “Voices of Freedom” was that Rawlings made it a collaborative effort, inviting internationally known Kentucky poet Nikky Finney to read original poems onstage as part of the production.

“Her voice brought a new meaning to the monologues,” Rawlings says, explaining that the addition of Finney’s work posed an implicit question to the audience: “What



Spalding Gray in *And Everything Is Going Fine*

BECOMING WHO WE ARE

RECENT MOVIES have been dominated by a surprising theme: the exploration of gender through black goo in outer space, strippers in Florida, and a red-haired teenage rebel in mythical Scotland. Detours among British ex-pats in India in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, a genetically modified high school student in New York in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and a scout troop on a coastal New England island in the fabulous *Moonrise Kingdom* added flavor to the mix. But it was the deceptively simplest of films that caused me to think most about what it means to be a human being, and how the fact of gender must be wrestled with, negotiated, and contested rather than assumed.

The wonderful thing about Pixar’s **Brave** is how it negates the historic disempowerment of female fairy tale protagonists. This is a new kind of Disney princess: one who doesn’t need a man to save her, nor homicidal violence to achieve victory; one who develops a healthy relationship with her mother; one, ultimately, who takes responsibility for her mistakes, integrating Snow White purity with Mulan’s steel. It’s also a physically beautiful movie, delightfully entertaining, and alive for adults and kids alike.

On the other hand, the world of **Magic Mike**, wherein Channing Tatum relives his earlier career as a bachelor-party treat, is a film about lost men who play on stereotypical female desire for tips. The soulful yearning for intimate connection that Mike embodies is the most emotionally resonant part of a film otherwise of average interest.

Not much more interesting was the black goo of **Prometheus**, a magnificently terrible or terribly magnificent sci-fi epic that purports to ask profound questions about the nature of being and the origins of life, but really only mentions these themes without exploring them. It’s notable merely for astonishing production design and action and Noomi Rapace’s performance as a woman in peril. A central sequence of self-surgery is already notorious (rightly so: it’s one of the most gripping scenes of female strength in cinema), but the film is too muddled to have a coherent philosophy about being human.

But the most profound questioning of gender and identity of this moment comes in the form of the smallest films. Steven Soderbergh’s filmed monologues of actor-author Spalding Gray in **Gray’s Anatomy** (1996) and the compendium film **And Everything Is Going Fine** (2010) record the public version of the inner life inhabited by a man trying to learn how to be a man: How to make peace with his torment; how to make up for his errors; how to be good. These 50 shades of Gray—both just out on Blu-ray and DVD—stand as a lesson and a warning that the makers of *Prometheus* should take to heart: Learn to take life seriously, but don’t take *yourself* too seriously. ■

Gareth Higgins is a Sojourners contributing editor and executive director of the Wild Goose Festival. Originally from Northern Ireland, he lives in Durham, North Carolina.



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does that tell you, from these monologues of actual slaves to Nikky's poetry? Has nothing really changed, and whose fault is it? It's not white people's fault."

With its combination of narratives, poems, and music, "Voices of Freedom was, noted the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, "part gritty history lesson, part performing arts monument to ancestors, and part impromptu church service ... the kind of brutal, difficult-to-watch details of history to which young generations should be exposed." And this was precisely her aim, Rawlings says, mourning that young black Kentuckians seem to lack awareness of their cultural heritage.

"I like to empower and educate. I worry about our young people. I worry about black America because there's no family structure anymore. Way back then it used to be Big Mama or Granny or Grandmama, someone in a household could hold a family together, and now Grandmama—she's in the nail shop with green extensions in her

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2011 Teaching Award



Rawlings mourns that young black Kentuckians seem to lack awareness of their cultural heritage.

hair, getting ready to go out and party, so there's no one left to mold the black mind anymore. For the first time I'm working with some teenagers now, doing a workshop for our summer camp. We have a goal to reach out, to help the young ones, to show them something other than a Beyoncé video. I love Beyoncé, but to show them something different—that's our goal."

In recent years, the Agape Theatre Troupe has become a cornerstone of the Roots and Heritage Festival. In 2011 the group performed "Sweatin' da Bluez—da Muzikle" there, Rawlings' musical adaptation of "Spunk: Three Tales by Zora Neale Hurston," a play written by Kentucky native and Tony Award-winning director George C. Wolfe. "Zora had these stories," Rawlings starts, breaking into a wide grin. "I just love her folklore. There is a musical score that goes with it, but I didn't quite like that, so I ventured out and I put some blues with it—John Lee Hooker, Robert Johnson, Big

Mama Thornton. It's another attempt to tell people about Zora, about John Lee Hooker, about the blues. Maybe if they can hear and see it onstage, they will go and do a little more research, take an interest in it."

Rawlings returns to lessons she learned from singing in the church choir to explain the appeal of her troupe: "You observe the singers who just sing, and the ones with the life experience to back it up. I have experienced so many singers that have grown spiritually, and to sing of the goodness of God and what God has done for you and what God has brought you through—it's just unbelievable." ■

Jason Howard is the co-author of *Something's Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal*. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book, *A Few Honest Words: The Kentucky Roots of Popular Music* (October 2012), with permission from University Press of Kentucky. Copyright 2012 UPK.

Reviewed by Stacey Schwenker

FROM SHAME TO GRACE

Ashamed No More: A Pastor's Journey Through Sex Addiction. IVP Books.

PASTOR T.C. RYAN spent 40 years haunted by the shadow life of compulsive sexual behavior. Despite the challenges, Ryan never gave up hope of trying to reach the fullest recovery. He tells his story in *Ashamed No More*.

Compulsive sexual behavior put Tiger Woods into the headlines and made him an object of ridicule, as it has for so many others. In telling his own story, Ryan tears back the curtain to reveal the fuller story of painful realities, challenges, and hopes for those faced with the daunting task of recovery from similar compulsions.

"Those who are not addicted to sex understandably assume that the addict at least experiences enjoyment from the sexual



activity, but this is not the case," Ryan writes.

As Ryan describes it, he was living a divided life. In one arena he was a capable and gifted pastor. In the other he was plagued by shame, self-loathing, and an inability to stop destructive behavior. His extensive explanation of the cycle of addiction, the lies he had come to believe from childhood, the role that therapy and other supportive measures played in his recovery, and his hopes for how the church can become the ultimate 12-step program make every chapter of this book essential.

Ryan explains the cycle of addiction, with each stage setting up the next: faulty core beliefs lead to impaired thinking, which then

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triggers the addiction cycle of preoccupation (being obsessed with escape), ritualization (routines for acting out), compulsive sexual behavior, and despair. This feeling of being “despicable,” where “the compulsive person [is] awash in despair, shame, and pain,” is unmanageable. It reinforces the starting point of faulty core beliefs and the cycle runs its course again in a slow downward spiral.

No story of recovery would be complete without some introspection and recounting of childhood stories. Ryan’s book is no exception. But rather than fill the book with graphic details, he questions our collective lust for such voyeurism and sees it as proof of a broken society that lacks genuine community where truth-tellers and sinners are welcomed with open arms. The details he does share offer a foundational understanding for how his addiction began. He frames the story in a way that makes it accessible—this is a book not only for the addict, but also the family members of addicts and the congregants of addicted pastors. If you wonder how a pastor could end up in this situation, this book explains it in convincing detail.

Ryan takes to task the church and our culture at large in how we shame others. He argues that we use shame as a means of controlling others’ behavior. This only reinforces worthlessness (and thus the addiction cycle), and does nothing to reflect the true nature of God and our status as God’s children. Ryan illustrates how distinguishing genuine guilt over a specific bad behavior from generalized shame is parallel to how Jesus was straightforward and truthful with people about their sins while always valuing and respecting their personhood.

Ryan also touches on how Christians tend to elevate sexual purity to the highest value and deem sexual sins as the gravest sins. He argues that this is not an expression of the gospel, but legalism that serves to create second-class citizens who are forever tainted. By integrating sexuality in its proper proportion within a holistic pursuit of God, Ryan offers us a chance to find healing. He does not make excuses for himself or any other addict, but rather calls us all to examination and authenticity. ■

Stacey Schwenker, a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary, is the advertising sales associate at Sojourners.

Interview by Elaina Ramsey

GOD TALK

Stanford anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann discusses the social science behind the evangelical relationship with God.

STANFORD UNIVERSITY anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann has managed to do what few other social scientists in academia dare do: explore how evangelical Christians relate with God.

In her latest book, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (Knopf), Luhrmann analyzes how evangelicals come to personally know God through prayer, communal support, and even “dates” with God. As part of her field research, she spent 10 years attending worship services, small groups, and events at Vineyard churches in Chicago and California. Known for their trendy, seeker-friendly, tear-inducing services and intimate Bible studies, the Vineyard is home to millions of evangelicals in the U.S. and around the world.

Without pitting reason (too much) against faith, Luhrmann applies psychological and anthropological understanding to evangelical Christian belief. Not bad for an outsider looking in. *Sojourners* assistant editor Elaina Ramsey spoke with Luhrmann in June.

Elaina Ramsey: What motivated you to study how evangelicals experience God?

T.M. Luhrmann: I’ve always been curious about how God became real for people. I knew that good, kind, wise people had different understandings of what was real, and that always fascinated me. While I was doing another research project, I was talking to this beach girl who told me that if I wanted to understand the God of her church, I should have a cup of coffee with him. I thought that was amazing. I decided then that I was going to figure out how people were able to experience God so vividly, so intimately, so dialogically.

Did you have any preconceived notions about how evangelicals relate with God?

I had the kind of naïve views that many people in the secular, liberal world have, which was that people weren’t terribly thoughtful about their faith. I didn’t think it was



T.M. Luhrmann

complicated and I didn’t think about the experience of God as a relationship. What I found was that people, in fact, were often well-educated, sharp, and very thoughtful about faith. What I have been most humbled by in this research is how little we really understand about faith relationships and how different it is from person to person—how cognitively complicated it is.

And I was surprised by the thoughtfulness with which people made judgments about whether God was really speaking. Secular folks are horrified by the idea that God speaks to people. Depending on your politics, God talked with George Bush and we ended up in this war. But it seems that as God becomes a more active presence in the mind, it’s not lost on people that they might make mistakes [in understanding]. In fact, I was impressed by how people handled that ... how the social community became involved in whether they heard God accurately. That’s a very different way of thinking about what people mean when they say they heard God speak.

Tell me more about the “theory of mind” you described in your book.

The standard, middle-class, educated American model of the mind is that the mind is private—it’s kind of walled off from the world. And often what is in the mind isn’t so real. The church is teaching people to use their imagination to experience God and to

take what is imagined seriously. Of course, the church is not teaching that God is imaginary. But in order to represent a conversation with God, you need to use your imagination. For an evangelical to experience God, that person has to think about their mind as not entirely private, but as being a place where you and God can meet and talk. You need to identify mental events that one might experience as just thoughts, as being the thoughts of God. So in these churches, people learn to use their imagination in specific ways—in ways that they are not regarding as make-believe. And so that's a big shift.

How does this kind of imagining God shape one's values?

Talking with God enables people to more readily take God's view of themselves: To see yourself not from the perspective of your own fearful, anxious, human-centered narcissism, but to see yourself from the per-

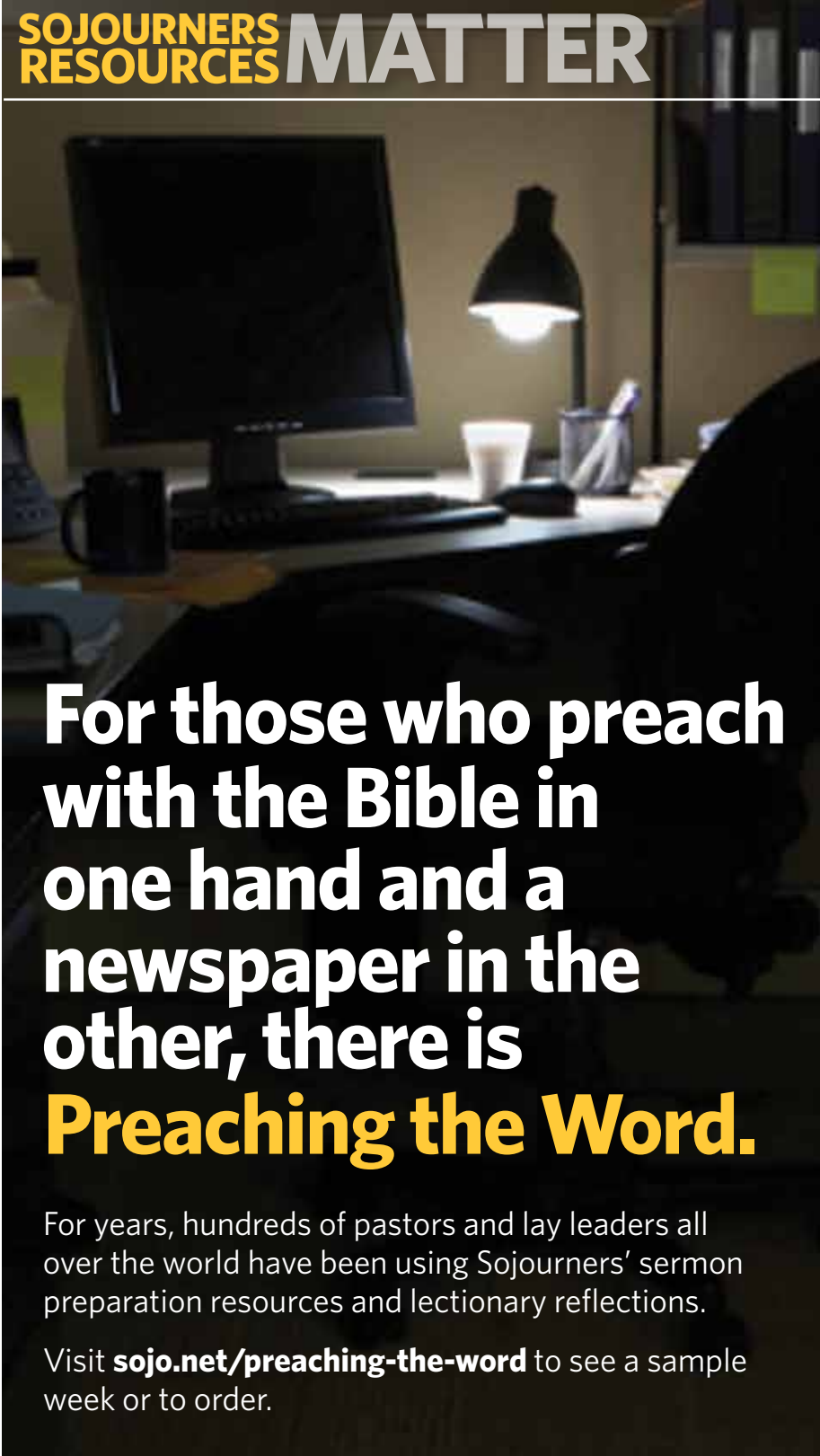
"I didn't think about the experience of God as a relationship."

spective of a God with a purpose, with a plan; to see yourself from a more loving and compassionate perspective. That's a powerful molding of the moral imagination, because it shapes the way that people think of other human beings. But that kind of process does not imply a particular kind of value set. Often the values that follow from the practice of learning to hear and interact with God are not specific political commitments.

Were you personally changed by the experience of spending so much time in these Vineyard communities?

I don't think of myself as a Christian. I had these moments of joy, though, that I was comfortable attributing to being an experience of God. I think Christians, if they are lucky, work wisely with their experience of God. They develop this greater source of eternal comfort—the sense that somebody is walking with you in the way that you remember your mom and your mom's love when she's not present. I think I found a little bit of that. ■

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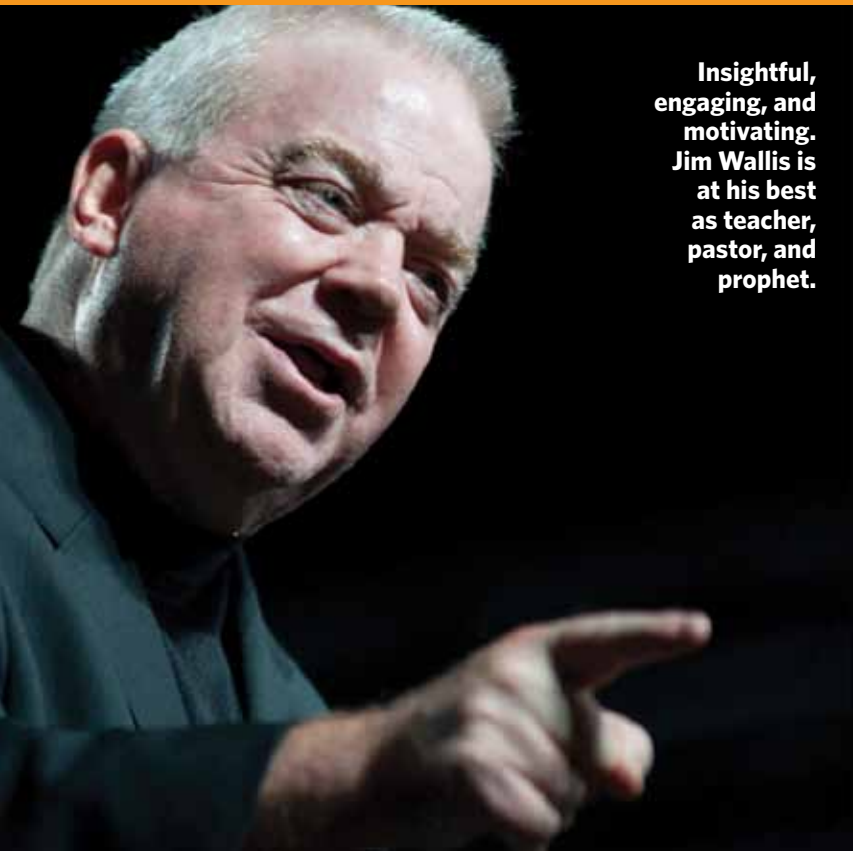
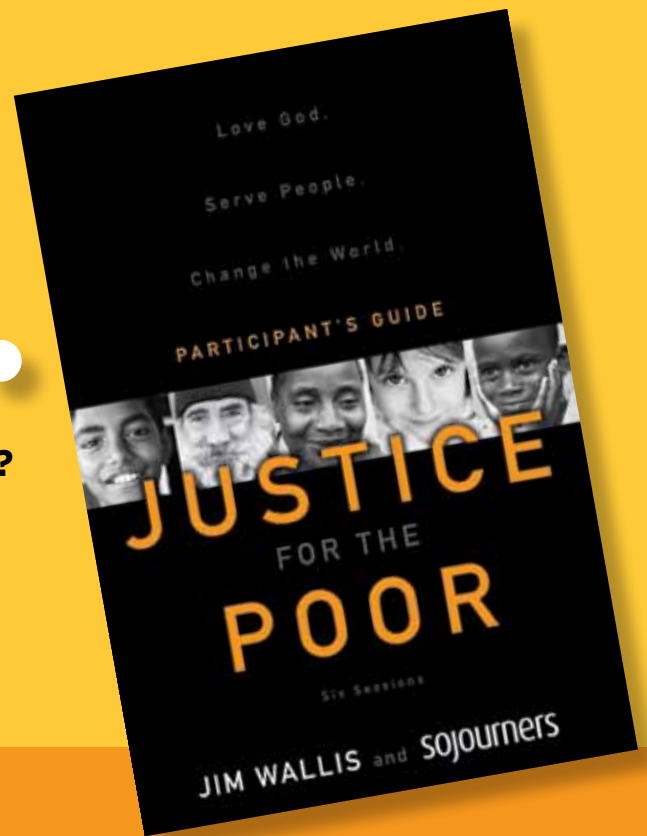
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The Presumption of Equality

EVER SINCE THE apostles positioned Mary Magdalene as an “unreliable narrator” telling an “idle tale” in Jesus’ resurrection story, some men in the church have claimed maleness as normative and orthodox and femaleness as, well, not.

In the recent case of the Vatican vs. the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the integrity of women’s witness is, once again, called into question by male hierarchs.

These Catholic sisters represent an unbroken, cohesive expression of faith in the history of American Catholicism and in women’s presumption of equality, completeness, and active moral agency both under law and under God—a presumption that is a shining light for women around the world. The sisters might

LCWR. “Women’s roles have been embraced in private, not public forums. Women leaders are affirmed as long as they are seen, but not heard (at least too much).” And as long as what the women say doesn’t contradict male authorities.

Even in Christian denominations that ordain women to leadership, too often they are forced to operate as

sick, the prisoner, and the foreigner at the core of the gospel message or is it not?

“What we see in this struggle is not a lack of our sisters’ integrity and authentic witness to Christian faith,” the open letter continues, “but a struggle that has been too familiar for all women of faith—a struggle over authority and who should have



A ninth-century mosaic of women leaders in the church of St. Praesede, Rome.

Women still are forced to operate as second-class citizens in the church.

have once shared accolades for faithful servant leadership with their brother priests, bishops, and cardinals, but over the course of nearly 30 years of unfolding pedophilia scandal and blasphemous mob-like cover-up, the laity has learned to look to the sisters alone for examples of Catholic gospel witness and Christian maturity, strength, and just plain grit.

But let’s not sideline this issue as “a Catholic thing.” We don’t get off that easy. The struggle over women’s authority runs right through the denominational diaspora of the body of Christ.

“Christian churches have long been ambivalent about us,” wrote Protestant female theologians in a letter of support to the women of

second-class citizens. Women pastors don’t get called to prominent congregations; they’re not allowed to prioritize the most urgent needs in their parishes; and they face constant friction. Time and again, we see the ideas of men described (and funded) as “entrepreneurial,” “innovative,” and “bold,” while women’s initiatives are “unorthodox,” “suspect,” and “back-burner, support-staff kind of thinking.”

“The plight of the powerless is familiar to the women of the church,” continue the Protestant scholars. “We, however, do not believe that authorities in any church should take away women’s power to determine for ourselves a vision for our ministries and vocations.” Many women—and men—have raised questions similar to those asked by Catholic women religious. Did God plan for an exclusively male priesthood or did it form as a result of the sin of misogyny? Do our baptismal vows anoint girls into the fullness of ministry as “priest, prophet, and king” in Christ or do they not? Is providing for the poor, the outcast, the

the power to define true faith.”

In 2009, when the Vatican announced an investigation of American Catholic women’s communities, Sister Sandra Schneiders wrote incisively of the motives behind it.

“It is a hostile move and the conclusions are already in,” Schneiders said. “It is meant to be intimidating. But I think if we believe in what we are doing (and I definitely do) we just have to be peacefully about our business, which is announcing the gospel of Jesus Christ, fostering the reign of God in this world.”

It takes a tremendous amount of strength for women to stay focused on the mission at hand, while constantly being undermined by unrepentant, unexamined chauvinism. And yet, like Mary at the resurrection, we know what we’ve experienced and nothing will stop us from preaching about it. ■



Rose Marie Berger, author of *Who Killed Donte Manning?* (available at store.sojo.net) is a Catholic peace activist and a Sojourners associate editor.

Romancing the Word

BY THE LATE MIDDLE AGES, which book of the Bible had inspired the most commentaries? The surprising answer is: Song of Solomon—a book that never mentions God once. There were more than 200 commentaries! A quirky piece of Christian trivia? Maybe. But it isn't trivial that for more than a millennium this collection of love poems was taken as the key to opening the innermost meaning of the whole biblical revelation. It was read—or rather explored through contemplation—as a poetic allegory of the quest of a God to awaken the creature's reciprocal desire. God, overflowing with yearning desire for creation, seeks union with us and arouses our own latent longing to be loved passionately, totally, and unconditionally.

A single reading this month provides a rare stimulus to explore this erotic poem as the Word of God. Some may want to take it as a signal to celebrate the sacredness of sex and intimacy, though we must note that marriage, home, domesticity, and childbearing lie entirely outside the poem's scope. But it may be more adventurous to find in the hottest pages of the



Bible permission to reinterpret the love of God through erotic metaphor, as our Christian forbears did. Benedictine monk Sebastian Moore gives us a hint: Why not reimagine the idea of the will of God—usually supposed to be a preordained plan that calls only for our obedience—in terms of God's longing for union with us, “the wanting-to-be of God in our lives”?

Martin Smith is an Episcopal priest, author, preacher, and retreat leader.

[SEPTEMBER 2]

In the Mirror

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

THE LETTER OF James seems to lie at an opposite pole to the reading from the Song of Solomon. James isn't the most attractive kind of reading. Diatribe is a genre few people warm to today, and this letter can sound didactic, sarcastic, and nagging. However, the image of the mirror calls for imaginative development. “If any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like” (1:23-24).

There is a process of reflection that is essential for establishing a link between hearing the divine summons to the life of self-giving, compassion, and peacebuilding, and actually committing oneself to it through persevering action. This process requires a willingness to know oneself and accept one's own humanity, poverty, and vulnerability. Those who “do the word,” as James' compelling idiom has it, are those who have spent time looking at their own faces long enough to accept the paradoxes of the human condition: our giftedness and our

brokenness, our talents and our neediness. They have found the spur to action through a costly self-knowledge that has broken down the excuses that we use to justify indolence in the face of the injustices and inequalities around us.

[SEPTEMBER 9]

'Conquerors of Heaven's Will'

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 146; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

THE RUTHLESS WAY single-minded people stay focused on their main task, the social risks they take by maintaining boundaries and rejecting distractions, is more offensive than impressive to most of us who like to please people and keep juggling lots of balls in the air. Mark's gospel isn't in the least afraid to present the ruthless focus of Jesus on his mission to his own people as something bound to offend. “Let the children be

fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs” (7:27). It makes Jesus' instant concession of defeat by the Syro-Phoenician woman, who uses his own put-down against him in a brilliant verbal judo throw, all the more intriguing. It suggests the willingness of divine grace to be taken on and won over by sheer human determination not to take no for an answer.

The best key to this passage is found in some verses from Dante's *Paradiso*, where the poet takes his cue from the very enigmatic remark attributed to Jesus in Matthew 11: “The kingdom of God has suffered violence and the violent take it by force” (12). Dante writes, “The kingdom of heaven suffers violence / from ardent love, and living hope, for these / can be the conquerors of Heaven's Will; / Yet not as man defeats another man: / the Will of God is won because It would / be won and, won, wins through benevolence.”

[SEPTEMBER 16]

God Appeals to Us

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 116:1-9; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

GOD DOES NOT dictate; God appeals to us. Proverbs 1 personifies the appeal of God. The divine wisdom is dramatized as an outspoken but alluring teacher, recruiting pupils to join her richly appointed salon, which is a school for the true art of living. She is out in the public arena, inviting everyone to join her on a radically alternative path to the crowded street where folly rules and ruin is the destination.

Jesus, who is dedicated to God's Sophia, also appeals for recruits in Mark 8 to join him on a radically alternative path that leads to life. Shockingly, this path is death row: the last mile along which the condemned plod under the burden of their own instruments of torture toward the killing fields! It was an everyday sight to see soldiers herding slaves and bandits to their crucifixion, and all right-minded people would steer clear and look away. Jesus proclaims that no one can be a follower of his who is not prepared to cross over to them in solidarity, to be on their side, to join the procession of those on death row, to identify with the rejected and the ruined. We have our work cut out

to rescue "carrying the cross" from being a pious metaphor for coping with burdens and to restore the cross to its searing force as a symbol of God's appeal to us to join the marginalized and abandoned in solidarity.

[SEPTEMBER 23]

The Meaning of Conversion

Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 54;
James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

"WHOEVER WELCOMES one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). As we reflect on Jesus' words, we might become aware of the way our conventional modern understanding of personhood tends to block our hearing of scripture. It is second nature for us to consider persons as individuals, intrinsically separate in identity. But in scripture, personhood is manifest in relationship, in mutuality, in the ability to participate in the personhood of one another, and all this is grounded in God. God does not shrink from

We will have to enter the kingdom of God maimed and lame and one-eyed.

wanting to be in our lives. A child is a form of the presence of Christ, and the presence of Christ is a form of the presence of God.

Unless we are prepared to enter into this strange world of mutuality, of interpenetrating life, we shut ourselves out from the reign of God. In Christ, nothing is quite what it seems, no one is quite what she or he seems. The one who has seen Jesus has seen the One who sent him, and this Eucharistic bread is actually the body of Christ and this wine, Christ's blood. And this church is actually the body of Christ, and the body of Christ is the embodiment of God. And the stranger who needs clothes or a prison visit is the Lord. Awakening to this reality, an awakening from which there is no going back, is at the heart of what Christians mean by conversion.

[SEPTEMBER 30]

Pluck It Out, Throw It Away

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 19:7-14;
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

MARK PRESENTS JESUS at his most trenchant in talking about the decisive action many of us will need to take if we are going to uproot, rather than merely trim, our most destructive patterns of behavior. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off" (9:43). Jesus tells us that for many of us to enter life, enter the kingdom of God, we will have to do so maimed and lame and one-eyed. Can we imagine language more difficult to reconcile with the focus maintained by all the popular spiritualities of our culture, the cultivation of wholeness? Who wouldn't prefer the rhetoric of healing, balance, harmony, realization of our full potential, and all the rest of the alluring promises of New Age spirituality, to Jesus' appalling hyperbole about mutilating ourselves in order to be saved?

Those recovering from addiction are probably our best guides to verifying Jesus' wisdom through experiment. In 12-step programs there is calm mutual support for the painful work of actually renouncing entire patterns of behavior, renunciation that certainly seems like diminishment and impoverishment to outsiders who cannot empathize with the particular vulnerabilities of addicts. And those in recovery are among the most authoritative witnesses to the paradoxes of grace. What seems like maiming ourselves actually sets us free to really enter life.

This teaching of Jesus has the utmost relevance to our political lives. The abolition of war would actually seem like cultural and economic mutilation to most people, since warfare is surrounded by such impressive trappings, and armaments provide immense profits, as well as employment for millions. But what does the reign of God demand? ■

"Living the Word" reflections for October can be found at www.soj.net/magazine. "Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon prep and Bible study, is at soj.net/preaching-the-word.

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Ken Davis

An Author's Cry for Help

AS AN AUTHOR whose book sales have, shall we say, peaked, I took particular interest in the rising popularity of *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, by Catholic Sister Margaret Farley. Until recently, her book had enjoyed only modest success, the predictable result of a title that gets the public's blood

Vatican officials objected to Sister Farley's frank theological exploration of modern sexuality which, anyone could have told her, is just not done when affiliated with a powerful religious institution that thinks "modern" means "the most recent part of the Middle Ages."

And back then, people didn't talk about gay marriage or masturbation or any of the other issues Sister Farley thoughtfully ponders, not without enjoying the church's hospitality sitting in wooden stocks for a few days.

To her credit, Sister Farley *had* vetted her writing with members of the Vatican's Doctrinal Department—it's on the third floor, I think, just past the restrooms marked "MEN" and "ALSO MEN"—who insisted that the book must conform to church doctrine. But this would have limited the author's subject matter to:

- papal infallibility
- the wisdom of bishops
- angels

So she decided to write about sex instead, prompting the Vatican to denounce her "defective understanding" of theology, and sending her book sales through the roof.

WHICH IS WHY, after much prayerful consideration, I must confess that my own book, *A Hamster is Missing in Washington, D.C.*, also suffers from a defective

understanding of theology. Worse, my book oozes with sexual innuendo and other decadent musings, not to mention the grievous doctrinal heresies that make *Just Love* look like *The Poky Little Puppy*.

In fact, the original title of my book was going to be *A Sexy Hamster is Missing in Sexy Washington, D.C.* But at the last minute, I regained a shred of decency and changed it. The text inside, however, has not been altered from its appalling deviance, and I call on Vatican censors to reject it with due vigor, and to publicly—I can give you a media contact list—denounce it.

Only the stern hand of the One True Vatican can guide me from the twisted path I have chosen, and return me to where true righteousness dwells, at or near the top of Amazon's best-seller list.

And then church officials can get back to what they do best: keeping the scourge of equality out of the church.

AND SPEAKING OF equality, Sojourners' "Thank-A-Nun Day" campaign has helped support Catholic sisters censored by their church hierarchy, and it's been a big success. Although our "Thank-A-Bishop Day," not so much. ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners and author of A ~~Sexy~~ Hamster is Missing in Washington, D.C.

Please, Vatican, censor me. I deserve it.

racing with "sexual," then quickly disappoints with the word "ethics," the marketing equivalent of taking a cold shower while wrapped in a wet blanket. Toss in the word "Christian" and your sales possibilities are further reduced to a half dozen seminary students still looking for a thesis topic.

All of which violates the advice my grandmother gave me years ago: "Put sex in a book title, honey, and it's money in the bank." At least I think it was my grandmother.

But then a miracle happened. When officials at the Vatican read the book—between pensive walks in long robes (that's what they do in the movies)—they were shocked and stunned, and immediately (six years later) declared it scandalous. This caused sales of *Just Love* to skyrocket. (Which proves the other thing my grandmother said: "No wait. I got it wrong. Have the Vatican criticize your book and *then* it's money in the bank.")

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Phil and Jessi first discovered Sojourners in 2006, when Phil became a youth minister. "Sojourners helped me dive into topics with my youth that encouraged them to move beyond themselves," he says. Sojourners' writers continue to challenge both Jessi and Phil. "My faith is always stretched, encouraged, or challenged by what I read," says Phil.

Recently, Jessi and Phil decided to join the Sojourners Sustainers Circle: "We wanted to give financially to organizations that are personal to us." Phil explains, "This is important work. I chose to support Sojourners because I believe in the message that it stands for. Beyond just writing about justice, Sojourners works to act it out and encourage others to do the same. Sojourners not only deepens discipleship" through its writings, "but also encourages disciples to boldly live out their faith by advocating for what they believe."

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“I’m thankful
to Sojourners
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for justice.”

—Phil Diekes

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